

BEADLE'S HALF DIME Library

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June 27, 1893.

No. 831.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXII.



"HANDS OFF! I'LL MANAGE HIM!" CRIED DETECTIVE SKID.

OR, Detective Skid's Diamond Haul.

BY J. G. BETHUNE.
AUTHOR OF "THE THIRD MAN," "THE EYE OF
HERCULES," "THE CIPHER 'F,'" ETC.

CHAPTER I. A LATE CALL.

DETECTIVE FELIX SKIDMORE sat smoking in his handsome bachelor apartments, and had begun to think about retiring for the night, when there was a brisk ring at the bell, and the answering servant brought a note to his door, with the book of a messenger boy in which to sign a receipt for the same.

The message was from his old friend, Addison Livingston, the wealthy banker, begging him to call at once on business of the utmost importance. The detective signed the receipt, consulted his watch and lighted another cigar.

"This must be important," he mused, "for it is now a quarter to midnight. I should think the matter would keep until morning, but he asks me to call at 'Low Twelve.' He is Master of our Masonic lodge and that expression is a favorite with him. Wonder what's up?"

While the officer was thinking, he was acting. It was a cool bright night in autumn, and he donned his light overcoat and hat, drew on his gloves, and swinging his slender cane in one hand, was soon moving briskly along the main avenue of Bluffton, on his way to the handsome residence of the banker, in the suburbs of the town.

That he was expected was proven not only by the bright light burning in the front room upstairs, where Mr. Livingston had his fine library, but by the appearance of that gentleman at the door, before the visitor could do more than step upon the porch and extend his hand to ring the bell.

The two grasped hands, and the instant the caller stepped into the broad hall and doffed his hat, the host shut the door, turned the key, slid the bolt in place and secured the chain. The observant officer was quick to note that his friend was in a state of nervous agitation, that he was striving hard to repress.

In answer to his inquiring smile, the banker said:

"I am glad you came so promptly; we'll go right up-stairs to the library and I will explain matters."

The gentlemen were old friends, and had spent many hours in intimate converse in the library, so that the detective needed no direction as he preceded his host, into the large, luxuriously-furnished library, with its glowing grate, its bright electric light, its wealth of rich and rare volumes, bric-a-brac and elegant furniture.

Skidmore drew off his gloves and overcoat, tossing the former into the silk hat that he had brought with him, and laid on a stand, at one corner of the room, sunk down into the yielding lounge, flung one leg over the other, looked kindly at his host, who had handed him a Perfecto, and seated himself nearer the grate, and said:

"Well, my old friend, how are you?"

Instead of answering the question, the banker inquired abruptly:

"Are you armed, Felix?"

"I always carry a revolver."

"Good! You must stay with me all night."

"What's up? Are you frightened?"

"I confess I am; my wife and niece are away, and there are only two servants in the house, and I suspect one of them is absent. That does not matter, however, since they are women, and stupid as they can be."

"What are you afraid of?" asked the detective, still smiling, puffing his cigar, and looking keenly at his friend, with a suspicion that he was just a trifle off his base.

"There's nothing the matter here, remarked the banker, tapping his forehead significantly, and managing to smile in return; "if there was I would send for the doctor instead of you. But I'm afraid of being robbed."

"And murdered?"

"Not so much that, though the greater might well accompany the lesser crime. But I am in danger of a visit from some desperate burglars, who have come hither from the other side of the world. Now don't start with another dread that my mind is toppling. I am agitated, I'll admit, but my head was never clearer than at this minute."

"You feel nervous because you are alone in your big house; but you have a burglar-alarm all through, and you can bring help if it should be needed."

"But that help must be here, right on the spot! It would take several minutes, and perhaps a considerable while, for the police to get here and, when they did so, they would be too late. The thieves must be baffled at the beginning."

"Well, Livingston, I am willing to concede that you are *compos mentis*, but don't try me much further, before explaining, or I will bring a physician to prescribe for you. You urged me to call here at Low Twelve. There's the town clock booming now, so I am a little ahead of time. You say I must stay with you all night; there's no hardship in that—rather the other way—and I'm agreeable. Now, having assured me that you believe you are in peril of being

robbed, I'm entitled to an explanation. So out with it."

Detective Skidmore showed that he felt at home by hitching about on the lounge, so that his head lay against the end cushion, one shapely leg was extended at full length, with the foot of the other resting on the floor, while, with both hands clasped behind his head, he calmly looked through the smoke of his cigar into the face of his friend. The latter, in dressing-gown and slippers, sat bolt upright in his chair, legs crossed close to the body, smoking with quick, nervous puffs, fidgeting in his seat, and showing by his restless manner that something unusual oppressed him.

The contrast between the two men was marked. The banker was sixty years of age, thin, somewhat stoop-shouldered, with no hair on his crown, and only a scant fringe of white around his neck and temples. His face had been handsome in his youth, but was now wrinkled, seamed and colorless and his countenance was always clean-shaven. Curiously, however, the mild blue eyes, that twinkled like a boy's beneath his shaggy brows, had never yet known the need of artificial aid. Doubtless they would have to come to it before long, but not yet.

Addison Livingston, the rich banker, had lived all his life in Bluffton, and was one of its foremost citizens. He was a leader in church movements, public-spirited, liberal, living beyond reproach, and, had he chosen, could have held any office in the gift of his townsmen. But he shunned the pool of politics as though it was poisoned, and continued along the even tenor of his way, well satisfied to allow the honors to go to those who craved them.

Two children, a son and daughter, had blessed his married life, but both died in infancy and the only one who could take their place, even in a slight degree, was his niece Muriel, the daughter of his widowed sister, who frequently visited himself and wife, sometimes remaining for weeks away from her home in Chicago.

Felix Skidmore's age was less than two-thirds of his friend's. Reclining in his indolent attitude on the lounge, he was the picture of athletic grace and strength. He was good-looking, with no beard showing, dark, hazel eyes, vigorous hair and a brightness of expression that marked him as a man of superior intelligence.

Some years before, Addison Livingston became the victim of a series of daring forgeries, which would have wiped out his entire fortune, had not Skidmore appeared at the critical juncture and not only run down the rogues, but saved the banker.

The skill with which the detective did this, not only won the gratitude of Livingston, but stirred him to admiration for the finesse and brilliancy of that gentleman.

The following year the detective corralled a band of counterfeiters, that were working through the towns in the Mississippi Valley, and for whose trail the Government officers had been blindly groping for months. In this affair, Skidmore not only proved his wonderful alertness and intelligence, but displayed a coolness and personal bravery which compelled the villains themselves to vote him the gamest individual they had ever run against.

This much stated, it will be easy to understand how it was that the banker appealed to him in the emergency which he was firmly convinced was on his threshold.

"It would be very strange," he said, in reply to the remark of his friend, "if I brought you here at this hour of the night and was unable to give you a reasonable explanation. Here it is, and I shall make it as brief as I can."

CHAPTER II.

TWO MEN FROM THE KIMBERLEY DIAMOND MINES.

"FIVE years ago my two nephews, Dick and Jo Hyler, left Kansas for the diamond fields of Africa. Their parents were dead, and they were so impoverished, by the repeated failures of their crops, that they would have suffered for the necessities of life, had I not helped them. They were spirited lads, and when I invited them to make their home with me and to take their own time in finding something suitable to do, they declined with thanks."

"They visited me for a few weeks, during which their cousin Muriel was with me. When about to leave, they were stricken down with fever, and I fully believe that, but for her patient and skillful nursing, they would have died. They were very grateful and formed the deepest affection for her. It was not what you would call love, but genuine, tender and touching friendship. They assured her, when they went away, that she should be remembered, and

they intended to send her some present from the other side of the world that would make her bright eyes sparkle. She laughingly assured them that she wanted nothing but their brotherly love and remembrance, but I knew Dick and Jo well enough to feel sure that they would never forget their promise. They would toil and struggle and deny themselves and suffer to redeem their pledge."

"Well, the boys made their way to the Kimberley Diamond Mines of South Africa, where they met rough times for several years. Good fortune came to them at last, and they struck it rich. They secured a dozen stones of the finest water, and, knowing that their fortune was made, bade adieu to that inhospitable region, and traveled ox-team, through the hundreds of miles of waste land to Cape Town."

"In that city, as you may know, are some of the most desperate criminals on the face of the earth. They are on the watch for returning miners, and will hesitate at no crime to rob them of their wealth. Despite the extreme care used by my nephews, they became objects of suspicion to several of these, who, in some inexplicable way, learned that they had diamonds with them worth a fabulous amount. But Dick and Jo were well armed, alert and brave, and succeeded in taking ship for Europe, with their wealth intact. They made their way to Amsterdam, and tarried in that city until the dozen diamonds in their possession were cut."

"All this time they knew the miscreants were on their track, and they did not doubt that they would follow them to America, with the chances of escaping and colliding with them about equal."

"When the stones were ready, the young men found they owned diamonds worth one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. They sold fifty thousand worth, receiving the money for the same, and deeming it all they needed for themselves. They concluded to return to their old home in Kansas, buy the farm they had been obliged to sell, and spend the rest of their days there."

"But by this time they began to feel more serious alarm than ever before. They were convinced that they had not only been followed from Africa by two at least of the gang that tried in vain to entrap them at Cape Town, but that the couple knew all about the ten stones which they meant to take to America."

"It was at this juncture that my nephews made a woful mistake. Nothing would have been easier than for them to forward the jewels by Express, and with perfect safety. It may have been that they had become nervous, from having been hunted so long and so far, and their ideas of the powers of the villains became exaggerated; they decided that the safest, if not the only safe way, was to bring them to this country themselves, and deliver them in person to Muriel, their cousin."

"But precaution was necessary. It was agreed that Dick should take the little casket containing the diamonds, while Jo should carry another exactly resembling it, and they should make their way home by different routes, not meeting until they reached this town of Bluffton."

"Jo, therefore, took the empty casket and put himself a little out of the way, to make it appear he had the stones, while Dick, with the real treasure in his possession, left Liverpool by the steamer that sailed a week later than his brother."

"The artifice succeeded, but it was at a fearful cost. The wretches, believing Jo had the treasure, dogged him, and one dark night he was sandbagged on the Bowery, in New York, and the empty casket taken from him. He died two days later in the hospital, without ever fully recovering consciousness. He deceived the wretches, but it was at the price of his life."

"Meanwhile, Dick pushed on to Bluffton, where he arrived yesterday. When he took rooms at the hotel, for he was too proud to come straight here, he found a package awaiting him. On opening it, the empty casket was revealed, with a note from the disappointed assassins, saying that they had been fooled once but they could not be fooled a second time. They knew he had the diamonds in his possession, and he never should take them to his Kansas home. Of course they had no means of knowing he meant to present them to my niece."

"Perhaps you may imagine the state of my nephew's mind, when he read this letter, and the cuttings from the New York newspapers which left no doubt of the fate of his brother. He had the diamonds with him, and, putting them in the hotel safe, he went to bed, too much

grieved over the death of Jo, and too much disturbed as to what he ought to do, to reason calmly.

"He called here this morning and left both caskets with me; one is empty and the other contains ten diamonds, whose average value is ten thousand dollars apiece. I saw from the looks and manner of my nephew that he was not himself. It would try the strongest nerves to be hunted more than half-way round the globe, and he was a painful contrast to what he should have been. He insisted on leaving the casket with me—one valueless and the other containing precious stones that are worth a fortune. I advised him to put them in the bank, where they would certainly be safe for a time, but he would not consent. He said they were intended by him and Jo as a present for Muriel, and he never could sleep until they were in her possession.

"He said he knew his enemies were in Bluffton, but he had eluded them in coming to my house. The diamonds would be safer with me than anywhere else, for the criminals did not know where they were. But they would be sure to find out before long. He, therefore, exacted a promise from me that I would not keep them in my possession more than one night, before dispatching them to Chicago to the address of Muriel.

"Now, you will see all through this singular business the impulse of a morbid and unbalanced mind. I confess that I was so much disturbed over Dick's mental condition that I thought more about him than the gems, or the business which they involved, and I did not reflect, as I ought to have done, before making the solemn pledge, that, after one night had passed with the gems in my possession, I should send them to my niece, by the safest means at command.

"Dick pained me by refusing to stay over night. He said he was sure to be traced to my door in time, and, if he remained, it would invite a visit from the burglars, whom he feared as if they were veritable Thugs from India. He promised to call this afternoon, if the coast was clear, but since he has not put in an appearance, I judge something has occurred to alarm him.

"You may be disposed to smile, Skidmore, at the story I have told, and so, perhaps, would I, but for the death of one of my nephews and the mental condition of the other. I placed no credence in the personal danger in which Dick believed he was involved, and gave no thought to my own peril until this evening.

"I was at church, and stayed behind to talk with the parson, after which I walked part way home with Undertaker Jones. I had left the casket locked in the safe there and was not thinking of them, when I became aware, just before reaching home, that two men were following me."

"Are you certain of that?" quietly asked the detective.

"There is no doubt whatever. I was not dreaming of anything of the kind, when it became too apparent to be a mistake. One was on the other side of the street, while the second loitered about fifty yards behind me.

"It made me nervous, and I quickened my pace. They did the same, but they did not offer to molest me, because there were too many people in the street, and then they must have known that nothing was to be gained by doing so, inasmuch as I was not likely to carry the brilliants around with me.

"I was atremble with alarm, when I entered my own gate, and did not breathe freely until I had made sure that the burglar-alarm was set, and everything was as secure as possible. Then I came up-stairs to the library, sat down and tried hard to think calmly over the situation.

"The more I reflected the more alarmed I became. Here I was, without another man under the roof, my coachman having gone away for the evening. I have no weapon, for I never carry one, and, if I did, I wouldn't know how to use it. I had a hundred thousand dollars in diamonds in my safe: what was to prevent those fellows from getting them?"

"Don't you keep your safe locked?" asked the detective.

"But, suppose they should rouse me in the night and give me the choice of opening it or having my throat cut?"

"Exactly; the diamonds are worth a good deal, but hardly as much as your own life. But before effecting an entrance, they would set off the burglar-alarm."

"And, as I said a few minutes ago, before the help thus summoned could reach me, they would have the diamonds and be beyond pursuit."

"This is a queer business," remarked Skidmore, assuming the upright position, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and looking thoughtfully into the glowing grate; "I never met anything like it before. I did not observe any suspicious characters on my way here, though doubtless they saw me enter, and kept themselves out of sight. Do you know where your nephew Dick is?"

"I haven't seen him since this morning, and I shouldn't be surprised if I never do again."

"Why?"

"He is likely to be murdered."

"I see no reason for fearing that; these fellows are after the diamonds, and the slaying of a person is only incidental. They supposed the other nephew had them about his person or they would not have harmed him. Now that they know the stones have passed out of Dick's possession, and are in yours, they have no reason to molest your nephew. He ought to be safe."

"Possibly, but no man need envy either him or me just now."

"Well, I am here to stay with you, and I feel no alarm."

"Because you are a brave man."

"Not of necessity because of that, but I see no reason for your misgiving."

"But I have not named the most important service I am about to ask of you."

"What is that?"

"Show me how to get those diamonds safely to Chicago."

CHAPTER III.

A COMMITTEE OF WAYS AND MEANS.

DURING the conversation between Banker Livingston and Detective Skidmore, the latter continued as cool and apparently unconcerned, as if they were discussing a matter of trivial importance. Nevertheless, the officer was doing some hard thinking, for he was quick to see the unique phases of the extraordinary problem that his friend now laid before him.

Unprecedented as it was in many respects, he perceived its gravity. A much less sum than one hundred thousand dollars will tempt unnumbered men to commit every crime in the decalogue, and he did not doubt that the Hyler Brothers had been followed from South Africa to Europe, and thence to America, where one of them had lost his life, at the hands of miscreants, in order to wrest the valuable diamonds from them. The greatest wonder was that the brothers had been able to retain them so long, for it would seem that that journey of many thousand miles must have afforded opportunities without number to obtain them. It may have been that they counted on driving the owners from their mental balance, before striking the final and decisive blow.

But, leaving those speculations until further developments should come, he resolved to solve the problem not alone of protecting the diamonds from theft, but of bringing the unspeakable ruffians to justice. It was the kind of work he liked; he would throw all his energy and soul into the effort.

"You wish the stones to be transported safely to Chicago and delivered to your niece?" he asked, looking up, as he still leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees.

"That's the service I ask of you; for my pledge is that they shall pass out of my possession to-morrow."

"Then you wish to shift the danger that is resting on the shoulders of your nephew Dick and yourself to Miss Wetmore?"

Detective Skidmore did not mean what was implied by this question, but he wanted to probe his friend a little further.

"Far from any such thought; I never would consent to anything of the kind, but I believe that when the gems shall be landed in Chicago and passed to Muriel, all danger will be over."

"Why?"

"Large as is the amount they represent, it is no larger nor as large as that of the jewels owned by some actresses and scores of ladies whom you can name as readily as I. You have only to attend one of the balls of the Four Hundred in New York, or go the opera or look at fashionable gatherings in other cities, to see women with jewels far more valuable than these. Many ladies in Chicago should be included in the list; but, whenever they appear in public, they are well-guarded and such precautions are taken as to render robbing almost impossible. When, therefore, my niece receives the present, she has only to exercise ordinary precaution to keep it. In other words, she nor any other lady, with such a wealth of gems about her person, would be secure in Bluffton or hundreds of the small towns in our country."

"There is truth in what you say, for few people besides the owners of valuable diamonds know what a score of anxiety they are and how incessant must be the vigilance to prevent their loss. It would have been unfortunate had Miss Wetmore been here to receive the precious stones."

"Dick told me he would have insisted that she should return home without them, leaving it to him to get them thither, so as to prevent risk to her, though it is not likely she would have been murdered for them."

"Many of the actions of your nephew are explainable only on the ground that he is mentally unbalanced. For instance, how much easier it would have been for him to go first to Chicago, where your niece is, before coming through that city to this place."

"He did not come through Chicago, but by way of St. Louis. In that city, he telegraphed to Mrs. Wetmore, and received a reply that her daughter was here. Such of course was the fact, but Muriel left the next morning for home and thus missed him."

"But why did he not go to Chicago, deposit the diamonds with one of the numerous companies whose vaults can defy a regiment of men, and then await your niece's return?"

"You gave the reason, when you said Dick is a little off. It was his wish to hand the gems to Muriel in person, but when he learned of Jo's murder, he gave up. He became eager for them to reach her without delay; the death of his brother convinced him that it was out of his power to do so personally; he therefore turned them over to me, which brings us back once more to the problem I have submitted to you: how shall they be delivered in Chicago?"

"You can travel from Bluffton by rail direct to St. Louis and thence to Chicago, and one of the most responsible Express firms in the country will guarantee the delivery of whatever is entrusted to them, on the payment of an appropriate fee."

"You speak of guarantee, Skidmore, when no man or corporation in this world can give an absolute guarantee, in such a matter. They or he may bind themselves to make the loss good, if the valuables are stolen, but that doesn't guarantee that they won't be stolen or lost. It is not the worth of the gems we wish to secure, but the gems themselves."

"Then you are afraid to trust the Express company?"

"I am; between great cities further east, I would not be, but reflect a moment. To reach St. Louis from Bluffton, you must journey over the Iron Mountain Railway, which extends hundreds of miles through the wild regions of Arkansas, and a considerable portion of Missouri. There are stretches of pine forest in Arkansas, where there are no dwellings in sight, except an occasional settler's cabin, for hours. Reflect further, that there has been more than one train robbery, within the past six months, and it is just as certain as that the sun will rise to-morrow, that, if it were known that a package of diamonds, worth a hundred thousand dollars, was to be sent through on a certain train, that train would be held up."

"Why need it be known?"

"Seemingly there is no reason why it should be, but the men following my nephew have shown such marvelous cunning, that I don't believe they would fail to find it out, if the package was dispatched in the regular way."

"Do you think it probable that these men, believed to be only two, have any connection with any of the outlaws of the Southwest?"

"I would not have suspected such a thing, had not Dick told me that one of them, whom he saw at Cape Town, was an American; and, for some reason which he did not give, he believes he was from this section of the country."

"It seems incredible, though it may be true. We'll admit for the sake of the discussion, that such is the fact, and that it is necessary to use strategy to get the jewels to St. Louis, and on to Chicago. Where are the diamonds?"

"In this room."

"Let me see them."

The banker glanced timidly around, as if fearful that some one was listening or watching, and then, observing the smile of the detective said:

"You don't know how nervous I feel; I shall not sleep a wink to-night; they are in my safe here."

A small office safe had been one of Mr. Livingston's articles of library furniture for a long time. It was opened by the ordinary combination, and, after turning the knob several times, to correspond with the numbers, he drew back

the short heavy door and took out two small brown boxes, some six inches long by two-thirds of that width. They were made of some kind of American wood, with a fine, close grain that showed through the varnish, and were fastened by a diminutive key, turning in a small lock.

Taking both out he laid them on the table by the detective.

"Which is the right one?" inquired the latter, surveying them curiously.

"I can't tell until I try them."

They were so precisely similar in appearance that the closest scrutiny could detect no difference.

It happened that the first one tried by the banker was the one containing the gems. The little key clicked in the lock, and, as he raised the lid, the amazing display dazzled the eyes of the spectators. There they were, ten royal diamonds that an empress might have coveted, of the purest water, gleaming in their splendor and scintillating with every color of the rainbow, each seemingly as big as a robin's egg and all of overwhelming brilliancy. They constituted a prize indeed for which any man would have been willing to risk his life.

The interior of the box was lined with crimson velvet, and the stones lay loose, so that when the lid was raised, they moved about freely as the box was shifted. When closed, the pressure held them fast.

It was the most amazing sight on which Detective Skidmore had ever gazed, and he sat silent for several minutes in rapt attention, holding the casket in his left hand, and feasting his eyes. Then he picked up one after the other with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, and raised it between him and the light, that he might more fully enjoy the sight.

He could not express his admiration in words. Finally, he put them carefully back in the box, closed the lid, leaving the key projecting, and passed it back to the banker.

"You want them to start for Chicago to-morrow and to be delivered safely in that city do you?"

"That's my wish."

"I'll do it for you," said Skidmore, compressing his lips, while a steel-like glitter flashed in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE WATCH.

"How will you do it?" inquired the banker of his friend.

"I will place that little box in my pocket, buy a through ticket to Chicago, and deliver the goods there."

Livingston, who was growing more self-possessed, shook his head.

"There you are again! How can you know that you will arrive there? Are you impregnable against knife-thrust and pistol-bullet? You never have seen either of these villains to your knowledge (and there may be more of them), but doubtless they know you; you will therefore be at great disadvantage. If courage and skill could insure success, I would have no doubt of you, but, unfortunately, they do not, in the affairs of this world. No, sir; my dear man, some better plan than that will have to be formulated."

"Have you thought of any?"

"I have."

"Let me hear it."

"You have admired that," said the banker, pointing to the mantel, on which sat a fine, marble, life-size bust of his beautiful niece; "it is a shame to disfigure it, but the situation warrants it, especially as it can be restored to its former purity. I will have it colored, so that it will look like a dead person. A handsome wig, resembling her natural wealth of golden hair can be adjusted; it will be dressed in clothes, suitable for a deceased person, placed in a coffin, boxed up, with the death-certificate attached, and directed to a well-known firm of undertakers in Chicago; we will conceal, in the dress of the dummy, the package containing the diamonds and send it through by Express; you may ride on the same train, though I doubt whether you can get permission to sit in the Express car with it."

Detective Skidmore laughed, and, rising to his feet, paced up and down the room for several minutes.

"Your scheme has the merit of originality at least, but you seem to have forgotten that a number of difficulties remain to be overcome."

"I have thought of all; my friend, Doctor Kerwin, will give me the necessary certificate, that will insure no inquiries or investigation after the box reaches the station."

"But you must get the coffin and box and have them shipped from this point."

"I have another friend, in an undertaker, who will attend to all that for me. Indeed I have already spoken to him."

"You have no fear of trusting him?"

"Not with my life; he need not know anything, except that, for the purpose of guarding against crime, the officers of the law have found it necessary to resort to this artifice."

"Well," laughed Skidmore, "try it, but, if our friends from Africa are watching so closely, won't they be apt to suspect something when the coffin leaves your house, and won't it make some embarrassing inquiries on the part of your neighbors?"

"I will not forward it from here; I will send the undertaker around, let him take away the bust, fix it up, ship the goods, and, in fact, do everything."

"I begin to understand something in the plan, now that you have explained it to me. I'll do what I can to help, half-regretting that it may prevent my meeting those fellows."

"Don't be too sure of that. Very well then; I will try to have everything arranged to leave on the noon train to-morrow, if that will suit you."

"Perfectly, and now suppose we take a peep outside. I don't mean to go there ourselves, but to try to find out whether any one is paying the house attention."

The banker led the way into the adjoining room, which was his sleeping apartment, and closed the door behind them. This left them in darkness, and they approached the front window without fear of being seen. The house was surrounded by spacious grounds, containing a number of trees and considerable shrubbery. Had it been spring or summer they would have obtained only partial glimpses of the walk, with here and there an open space between the trees. But nearly all the vegetation, except the non-deciduous portion had shed its leaves and the bright moon, shining from an unclouded sky, helped them to a better view than they anticipated.

Looking across the street, which was in fair sight, they observed two houses, from which came not the first glimmer of light nor could they distinguish anything of that nature in any direction, except from the street lamp in front of the banker's gate. No wonder, for it was near one o'clock.

A dim figure glided along the street, appearing for a moment, and then quickly vanishing, as though the belated pedestrian was in a hurry to reach his destination. There was nothing in his appearance to cause question and neither of the watchers gave him a thought. Men who meditate mischief are not apt to move in that fashion.

The two friends waited for fully a half-hour longer, furtively watching from each side of the house in turn; but, seeing nothing to cause suspicion decided to sleep, or rather the banker decided that he would try to sleep, for he declared that he was in that nervous state that he would not close his eyes through the entire night.

"I'll make you a little bet," said the detective, assuming an easy position on the lounge, "that you will be sound asleep, long before the rising of the sun."

"This is no trifling matter, Skidmore," returned his friend reprovingly; "murder has been already done, and something tells me that more crime will soon be committed. I would be a strange man, if at such a time, I could find cause for jest!"

"I am not jesting; but—good-night!"

The detective quickly glided into the land of dreams, and did not open his eyes until the sun was shining in the window. Without rising, he turned his head and looked around. In the chair by the grate sat Banker Livingston, sound asleep.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE SHIPMENT.

THERE is nothing like sunlight to give a man courage. Banker Livingston was able to join Detective Skidmore in a laugh over his extreme nervousness of the night before, though insisting that he had good cause for misgiving—a claim that his guest willingly admitted.

With the coming of day, they addressed themselves to the serious work before them. Skidmore contended that the first thing to be done was to have breakfast, with one or two cups of steaming coffee to help clear his brain. His host gladly complied, after which they bestirred themselves.

"Now," said the officer, "since both of those

boxes are alike, we must make sure of the right one; it would be odd if we sent the empty one to your niece."

"To make sure we will lock them in the safe till I send the undertaker here."

This was done, and, after a few minutes' consultation, the plan of procedure was arranged.

Fully convinced of the cunning and unscrupulousness of the unknown parties, against whom they were working, Skidmore agreed to stay in the library until the undertaker arrived and took away the bust. The explanation of the affair to the undertaker was to be made by Livingston.

The working of the lock of the safe having been explained to the officer, he sat himself by the library window, with a cigar in his mouth and the morning newspaper in his hand. It looked as if nothing in the world could stir the blood of this unimpressionable man.

Barely a half-hour elapsed, when the bell tinkled, and, a few minutes later, a servant opened the library door and showed in the undertaker. The detective's profession had not brought him in contact with those of his lugubrious calling, but he hardly needed an introduction to the visitor, whose services were sure to be in demand, sooner or later, by all his townsmen.

"Good-morning!" he said, as the officer rose to his feet, and speaking with that soothing, sympathetic voice which the genuine undertaker is not slow in acquiring.

"I presume Mr. Livingston explained everything to you," said Skidmore, as soon as the servant was beyond hearing.

"Yes; he said you would give any aid I needed; I presume that is it?" he remarked, indicating by a nod of his head the bust on the mantel.

"Yes; do you need my help?"

The undertaker stepped forward and lifted the bust from its pedestal.

"No; it is not very heavy; I can readily carry it; the carriage is at the gate. Now, what about the caskets? I presume you will bring them to the store, or rather take charge of them while you ride with me?"

It was on Skidmore's tongue to assent, but his professional caution intervened. If he were seen riding away in the company of the undertaker, it was certain to be discovered by one of their enemies, and, more than likely, would give an inkling of the truth. It was better that they should not be observed together.

"No; I will walk," he replied.

"And bring the diamonds with you?"

Here again was another important matter that must be decided off-hand.

"I will bring them with me; how long before you will be ready?"

"Well, Mr. Livingston is in a hurry, and I will try to be prepared for you at the end of an hour or a little longer. You know where our establishment is?"

"I am not sure."

"Here is our card; it is on Main street; you will have no trouble in finding it. Make sure," added the undertaker with a significant smile, "that you bring the right one."

"Have no fear of that."

Infolding the bust in a black cloth that effectually concealed it, the undertaker walked out of the library, down the stairs, passing through the front door and along the gravelled walk, to where his black-painted carriage awaited him. Skidmore followed him with his eyes, until he had carefully placed his heavy bundle inside, stepped after it, taken up the reins and disappeared down the street.

Inasmuch as the officer had considerable time at command, he decided to wait in the library, for a little while, in the hope of catching sight of one or more of the suspicious parties; but if they were in the neighborhood, they took care to avoid discovery by him.

He now opened the safe door and took out the two boxes.

"What a joke if I should carry away the wrong one," he reflected, "but I won't."

The little key in the lock of the right casket fitted both, and, to prevent the possibility of mistake, he opened them in turn.

It was impossible to make an error. He replaced the empty one, after which he again raised the lid of the other. There the ten matchless stones lay, shining in all their splendor and richness, and he could not resist the temptation to feast his eyes again upon them.

"Carbon," he muttered; "in another form, you are charcoal; in another plumbago, neither of which possesses more than a trifling value, but in this shape, you are among the treasures of the earth. How many deaths have your

brothers caused! The Kohinoor, the Mountain of Light, the Regent, the Pitt and others have their history traced in blood. Even you have already been the death of one person: are you to bring down others, before you perish? You shall last long after I, and the beautiful lady who owns you, shall have crumbled into dust: who dare cast your horoscope? Not I."

He carefully locked the box, placed the tiny key in his vest pocket, and then shoved the casket into an inner pocket of his coat. Its size made it a close squeeze, but he buttoned the garment over his breast, and touched his hand to his hip, where his Smith & Wesson rested.

"How easy to avoid all this bother! I have only to board the next train northward, and ride straight through to Chicago; I have executed errands more risky than this; but Livingston's wishes must be followed, and the diamonds are to take the ride in the company of a pretended dead body, with me sitting back in the cars, waiting for something to turn up."

With that misgiving which comes over a person at such times, he once more swung back the short, heavy door of the safe, and assured himself that the remaining box was empty. Then, leaving it there, he secured the combination, took out the genuine casket, peeped within, relocked and restored it to his inner pocket, rebuttoned his coat and came out on the street.

With the suspicion that hostile eyes were watching him, he assumed a careless manner, puffing his cigar and sauntering along, as though nothing in the world occupied his thoughts, and made his way at the same leisurely pace toward the undertaking establishment of Jarvis Jones, whose business card was in his custody, alongside the key of the casket.

But, while making this promenade, he was never more on the alert. He scrutinized the face of every man and woman whom he met, glanced across the street, and stopped several times to look into the show-windows, in order to gain the opportunity to look behind him. At one corner he halted, and, facing the highway, stood for fully fifteen minutes, with his eyes roaming back and forth, hither and thither, over his entire field of vision. The result was the self-admission that he failed to observe a single individual, to whom he could attach the slightest suspicion.

"If he has passed me, or has his eyes on me at this moment, I have no more idea who he is than I have of the man in the moon; my foemen are certainly worthy of my steel. This is going to be the greatest fight in which I ever engaged."

No truer prophecy was ever made by man.

It was more than an hour after leaving the banker's residence that he turned into the gloomy establishment of Jarvis Jones, where he found the undertaker awaiting him, as cool, quiet and solemnly affable as ever.

"Is everything ready?" asked the detective.

"Yes; I have just finished. Step this way, and we'll close the door against interruption."

"That is prudent," remarked Skidmore, following the gentleman to the rear, where, first shutting the door and turning the key, he gave his visitor a surprise indeed.

No artist could have done better. There was the coffin, inclosed in the ordinary pine box, with the death certificate attached, and signed by the most widely known physician in Bluffton. The lid of the inner receptacle being raised disclosed the bust of Muriel Wetmore, so delicately and skillfully tinted, or rather with such a life-like paleness, that the detective started, half-believing for the moment that it was a genuine corpse. What seemed to be the hands were crossed on the breast, and the shroud was tasteful and costly.

"What do you think of it?" asked the undertaker, after the survey had continued several minutes in silence.

"It is wonderful; I never saw anything like it."

"Stand by me until everything is fastened. Then keep me in sight, until my responsibility ends."

The detective produced the casket, and passed it to the undertaker, who gently shoved it beneath the shoulders of the counterfeit body, the officer closely watching him all the time. Then he lifted the coffin lid in place and screwed it down. The pine box was similarly secured, and the detective never lost sight of it until it reached the railway station.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAGEDY AT THE INN.

ALL the arrangements were conducted with such care that a great deal of time was consumed. The pine box, inclosing the coffin, did

not reach the station until ten minutes before the arrival of the north-bound train. The undertaker stayed to see it placed on board, the ticket having been bought by Banker Livingston, who left it in the hands of the agent to await the call of the detective.

Leaving the undertaker to keep his eye on the box, Skidmore sauntered up and down the platform, in and out of the station, on the alert for any and all suspicious parties. There were an old woman, two boys, a young lady and her escort, and an Irishman waiting to take the train. A study of each in turn, and several times over, convinced the officer that they were as innocent as so many babes.

He was correct, but nevertheless, one of the ruffians that had followed the Hyler brothers all the way from South Africa was there and had his eye on him!

Five minutes passed, and Banker Livingston, whom the detective had not seen since early that morning, was descried coming down the street on a rapid walk.

"He wants to exchange a word with me before I leave; he has thought of some additional precautions, but heavens! how white he looks! Something is up!"

Catching sight of his friend, who walked down the platform to meet him, the banker broke into a run, and panting with excitement, gasped:

"Have you heard the news?"

"No; what is it?"

"My nephew Dick was murdered last night!"

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the startled detective, catching the arm of his friend, and walking toward the box, where it rested on a truck, under the eye of the watchful undertaker; "tell me about it."

"As nearly as I can find out, Dick went to bed at the hotel about eleven o'clock last night. He did not rise as early as was expected, but nothing was thought of it until near noon, when repeated knocking by the chambermaid, having failed to bring any reply, the landlord was called and forced the door. There lay poor Dick on the bed, with his clothing on, and a knife thrust in his side. His body was cold and he must have been dead for hours. Isn't it frightful?"

The banker was so overcome that he sat down on the truck beside the pine box, while the undertaker, as if not wishing to listen to a conversation not intended for him, moved several paces away. But the couple were too intensely interested to pay any attention to him.

"It is shocking indeed; it is like the Mafia of the Italians; they do not hesitate to strike wherever or whenever they choose."

"The police are at the hotel, and the coroner has taken charge. Felix, you mustn't take this train."

"Why not?"

"I want you to go back to the hotel with me, and help trace these murderers; our blundering officers will accomplish nothing; if any one can succeed, it is you."

"But what about this?" he asked indicating the box.

"I don't know: what shall we do?"

"Since it is here, I advise that it go forward; I can follow on the three o'clock train."

"Do you think everything is right?" asked the sorely perplexed banker; "are they with it?"

"They are; I saw the casket placed under the shoulders, where it will not attract the eye of any person."

"And nobody knows anything about it?"

"I can guarantee that."

"Very well; let them go; they are not to be compared with the lives of poor Dick and Jo, who have paid a dear price for their love for Muriel. Here comes the train," added the banker, as the whistle, a short way down the road, struck their ear.

"There is no need of our waiting; if I am to follow on the next train, every moment is precious and Mr. Jones will attend to matters; let's be off."

Without tarrying to speak to the undertaker, the two stepped off the platform, and walked hurriedly up the street. The banker had rested long enough to recover breath, and he was almost on a run again, uttering exclamations of horror, distress, and wonder, and expressing vain regrets that his nephews had ever been unfortunate enough to find the accursed stones in the mines of South Africa.

Detective Skidmore made no answer, except now and then to give a guttural assent, to show that he heard what his neighbor said, but he was thinking with might and main, over the strange tragedy that had taken place, as may be said, under his very nose.

Such an occurrence naturally turned Bluffton topsy turvy. Evidence of excitement was visible everywhere and, along the street, though less than an hour had passed since the discovery of the crime, a crowd of several hundred were swarming around the hotel, all striving to push their way in, and swayed by that morbid curiosity that takes possession of the average man and woman at such times. But half a dozen policemen were on hand, and with their stout clubs, kept the swarm back, suffering no one to enter except for good cause. The house had been closed and the landlord was thankful for the protection of the officers, which prevented his place being literally overrun.

When the white-faced banker appeared, a sturdy policeman made way for him, and nodded to Skidmore, who kept close at his heels. He knew the detective, and said in a low voice as he passed:

"Here's a job for you, Skid."

The latter made no reply, but helped his friend through the doorway, hall and up-stairs, where only, by continued exertion, and the aid of the officers stationed there, were they able to get inside and obtain a view of the body, of which the coroner had taken charge.

The preliminary investigation brought out the following facts:

Richard Hyler occupied a room on the second floor, at the rear, of the principal hotel in Bluffton. It was plainly furnished, after the style of an ordinary inn, and was one of the best in the house. The man had evidently thrown himself on the bed awhile, before retiring for the night. Undoubtedly he had fallen asleep and while in that condition had been stabbed to death. The reason for this generally accepted theory was that there were no evidences of any struggle, as would have been the case, had he been attacked ever so stealthily, while awake.

The weapon with which the crime had been committed was missing, taken away of course by the assassin, and, so far, as could be ascertained during the hasty examination, he had left not the slightest clue that could point to his identity.

The open window, however, connecting with a sloping roof, over the kitchen, disclosed the means by which he had entered and left the room. Slight abrasions on the sill and the shingles, established this fact beyond a doubt. From the lower edge of the roof to the ground, was barely eight feet, and, directly below, was a brick pavement, on which the assassin had landed, thus excluding what might have been valuable evidence had he alighted upon the soft earth.

When these facts had come to light, Detective Skidmore managed to exchange a few words with the landlord.

"Had you any strangers in the house last night?"

The man showed by his look that he did not fully comprehend the question.

"Only him and the one that come in the window," he said.

"I mean to ask whether you have had during the past day or two, any guests that were unknown to you personally."

"No, sir; I have three or four, who stay with me regularly, but all of them belong in Bluffton. The only one that has asked for a room for a week past, that I didn't know, was that poor fellow in there, Richard Hyler, as he writ his name on the book, and I never remember having set eyes on him afore, though Mr. Livingston tells me he is his nephew and was in Bluffton years ago, but then he always stayed with his uncle."

Skidmore said nothing further, but worked his way back to the bedroom, to learn whether anything additional had come to light that could give the most shadowy clue to the author of the tragedy.

The inquiry was of that vague, broken nature, so generally seen at such times, but the keen perception of the professional detective saw that nothing of moment had been brought to light and there was no likelihood that there would be. Mr. Livingston had announced his intention of taking charge of the remains as soon as the authorities permitted. At the same time, he quietly made know that he should offer a reward of five thousand dollars for the detection of the assassin, or rather assassins, for he had learned enough to satisfy him that two, if not more persons were concerned in the crime.

Drawing the banker aside, Skidmore said in an undertone:

"It is nearly three o'clock and I must leave."

"Don't you think you ought to stay here?"

"No; nothing is to be gained by doing so; I can't get fairly to work until the first excite-

ment is over and the way cleared, so as to give me elbow room. That will take several days, and, in the mean time, I must go elsewhere. If you have anything to say to me, telegraph to the Lindell, St. Louis, or the Palmer, at Chicago. A dispatch to either will reach me. Good-by."

He pressed the hand of his friend, bidding him keep up his courage, and hastened to the railway station, where he arrived just in time to board the three o'clock train.

CHAPTER VII.

AT WILD CAT CREEK.

THE train boarded by Detective Skidmore was a special, consisting of two palace cars, whose sole passengers, until it reached Bluffton, were the president and a number of directors of the road. Skidmore was permitted to join them, when the engine halted to take water, because he was an old friend of the president, for whom he had done some excellent work. In fact, it may be said that he was retained by the company and was subject to their call at any time.

When, therefore, the officer appeared at the station, and was observed by the head official of the line, he was invited to come aboard and make one of the party. Skidmore explained that he had missed the regular noon train, and would be glad of the accommodation, as he was anxious to be in St. Louis at the earliest possible hour.

"You won't lose any time by going with us," remarked the president, as the guest shook hands with him and the directors, most of whom were known to him.

"How is that?"

"We have received word that the engine of the up train broke down at Wild Cat Creek. I have telegraphed to them to wait for us, though they might get a locomotive from Little Rock."

"Then you propose to attach these cars and let them have your engine," remarked Skidmore, seating himself among his friends, as the special moved off.

"We could readily do that, if this were a junketing trip, and not one for business. We are contemplating building an expensive bridge across Wild Cat Creek, and our folks wish to look into it; we shall, therefore, side-track this special, and stay there till some time to-morrow. We'll let the regular have our engine, and it ought to make up most of the lost time before crossing the line into Missouri."

This having been explained, Skidmore informed his friends of the tragedy of the night before in Bluffton. It roused the interest of the gentlemen, who made many inquiries of the detective. He could tell them no more than the reader has already learned. When pressed for his theory, he said he knew too little to warrant such expression. At the best, it could be only guesswork, and they were as competent at that as was he.

But, although Felix Skidmore chatted and laughed with the gentlemen around him, and even seemed to forget the sad tragedy to the extent of relating some amusing incidents, his thoughts were upon that strange crime, and his busy brain was never busier than in forming explanations of the incidents, which, for a time, seemed beyond explanation.

That Dick Hyler had been killed by the same parties who had brought about his brother's death in New York City, he did not doubt. Inasmuch as he could conjure up no necessity why the former should have been slain at all, he was compelled to suspect that it was done out of mere wantonness, or in revenge for the repeated defeats the desperadoes had received at his hands, in their attempt to steal the diamonds.

What was unaccountable to him was that these wretches, coming all the way from the other side of the world, could have any connection or understanding with any of the outlaws in the Southwest that were engaged in holding up railway trains. The supposition was incredible on the face of it, but he could not quite dismiss the belief that something of that nature existed.

Like the fearful Mafia of New Orleans, this gang seemed to be growing so daring in their deeds that they were likely to precipitate their own ruin from that cause.

He suspected that the criminals had already left Bluffton, since there was no reason for their remaining, after the commission of the crime and the departure of the diamonds. There had been several opportunities for them to get away, but, if, as was believed, their efforts were turned toward stealing the precious stones, they were not likely to leave until the

latter were taken away. It followed, therefore, that if such were the fact, they must have secured passage on the noon up-train which he originally meant to take.

The fact that he had not noticed any suspicious persons while at the station signified little. They might not have come up until the last minute, immediately after he hastened off with the banker. They could have kept out of sight, and, if they chose, boarded the cars, before they had come to a halt, or after they were under way again. It was the belief that one or more of them was on that train that lay broken down at Wild Cat Creek, which made him feel thankful for the kindness of the president of the road, in inviting him to make one of the select party in his charge.

There were many features about the matter that were wholly unexplainable to the officer, at least until he gained more light on the incidents that had already taken place; but, as he reflected and turned them over in his mind, something in the nature of light broke upon him.

The strangest fact of all was that, starting from South Africa, these desperate criminals had been obliged to go to England, thence to Holland, and then to New York, and finally to this insignificant town in the Southwest, in order to gain the opportunity to steal the diamonds, which up to date had not been stolen.

Were there no chances in London or Amsterdam, or at any of the points between? It was easy to see why the thieves might have hesitated to array themselves against the skilled officers in the large cities, when they knew that, if the brothers were molested, they would give a much better opening in the comparatively unsettled portions of America.

They had slain Jo Hyler in the metropolis of the Union, and probably learned from the papers taken from his body, that his brother expected to meet him in Bluffton. Not knowing the route he would take thither, and not daring to linger, they made their way to that town and simply awaited his coming. They may thus after all have had time to establish an understanding with some of the outlaws that were trying to pick up a living by robbing railway trains.

This much seemed comparatively clear to the thoughtful detective, who, in thinking it all over, said to himself:

"I can't see how they are going to succeed, but there is a possibility of it, for, if they suspect that that supposed dead body is only a screen for the diamonds, they will be on hand before we leave the lowlands of Arkansas."

Then he fell to ruminating over the events of the morning, dissociated from the tragedy at the inn.

"I took the stones from Mr. Livingston's safe—there is no doubt of that, for I examined them after the safe was locked, with the empty box inside; I placed them in an inner pocket, and never laid hands on the box, until I arrived at the undertaking establishment; there I saw Mr. Jones place it beneath the bust of Miss Wetmore, and the lid was screwed down, and then the lid of the box secured in place. It did not pass out of sight, until it was at the railway station, ready for shipment north. Mr. Jones stood by it, and saw it placed on board, so it must be there at this moment, and the chances are a thousand to one that the diamonds, within the next two days, will be in the hands of Miss Muriel Wetmore, for whom they were intended by the poor fellows that gave up their lives for her."

Repeated reasoning revealed no flaw in the logic of the officer, who was correct in believing that the box, was not disturbed, after being secured, and that it was shipped intact from the Bluffton railway station and started northward without the first attempt being made to tamper with it.

And yet what woful mistakes the sharpest men sometimes make!

Having reached this conclusion, the speculations of the detective were naturally projected forward.

"Should the criminals suspect the truth, how are they going to place their hands on the treasure? If the attempt is made it will be between here and the Missouri line. They may be on that up train, that has broken down a short way ahead of us, but how they will manage it, I cannot guess. Possibly they have agreed upon some signal or cipher message, to be sent ahead from one of the stations, by which the train will be held up at some lonely place and search made for the diamonds."

"It isn't likely they will try it, until they are

a good deal further north and in the wilder regions of the State. Let me see—we shall strike them, providing no accident happens, late to night. As nearly as I can figure it will be about Low Twelve again, as Mr. Livingston calls it, when we shall see what we shall see."

While the president and his directors were discussing business, Skidmore excused himself, and, taking a seat some distance away, drew out a time-table and made some careful calculations. The conclusion reached was that the danger to the train, if any really existed, would assume shape late that night in the neighborhood of Panther Hollow.

This was one of the most lonely sections on the entire run of the long line of the Iron Mountain Railway, with vast pine woods, stretching for many miles in every direction. These solitudes offered inviting refuge to outlaws, after the commission of such a crime, where they might bid defiance to a regiment of officers and detectives in their efforts to run them to earth.

Amid such reflections as these, the special began slowing up for Wild Cat Creek Station, where the regular train northward was awaiting them.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT PANTHER HOLLOW.

THE run of the special from Bluffton to Wild Cat Creek gave Detective Skidmore time to decide upon his course of action, so far as he could, with precious little actual knowledge and much speculation upon which to base the decision. Since he was the only person on the train, who was to continue his journey beyond the point named, he was confident of boarding the regular without attracting the attention of any individual.

He accepted it as a fact that one or more of the parties, whose trail he was following, were in those cars, and naturally they would be on the lookout for him. They had the advantage of having seen him before, while, on his part, if he had met them, it was without any thought of their identity.

The special had not yet come to a full halt, when, bidding the president and directors good-evening, the detective slipped from the rear platform and turned into the woods, which lined the track on both sides. It would necessarily take some time for the locomotive to be switched around to the head of the cars, so that he knew he had full opportunity to complete his preparations.

The moment he was out of sight of every one, he whipped off his new derby and flung it away. He would have been glad to preserve it, but it wasn't prudent. His next proceeding was to draw a pair of false whiskers and mustache from his pocket, which he carefully adjusted through the sense of feeling. Such a disguise would have amounted to little in the sunlight, or in a well-lit room, where he was subject to a close scrutiny, but it was just the thing for the present occasion.

The derby was replaced by a slouch hat, of a brown color, his coat was buttoned close about his neck, and, with his hands shoved into his side pockets, he was ready for business. He paused only long enough to make certain that each of those pockets contained a loaded Smith & Wesson. They were there, because they could be drawn much more quickly, if necessary, than if in his hip pockets, where he usually carried them.

Since the north-bound train had been waiting for a good while at this lonely station, with the knowledge that it could not resume its journey until the arrival of the special, many of the passengers made use of the opportunity to stretch their legs, by sauntering here and there, gathering in groups, discussing unimportant matters, and lounging aimlessly about, after the manner of those who find time hanging heavily upon their hands.

These people watched the switching back and forth of the engines, with an interest that would not have been theirs at any other time. Not until the exchange was completed, and the whistle of the new engine echoed through the surrounding solitude, did they scramble into the cars, each platform being crowded with them, hurrying back to their old seats.

Among the three men who climbed upon the rear platform, was Skidmore, who followed the couple through the door, and made his way at a leisurely gait to the smoker in front. This journey was what might be called a prospecting tour. Without seeming to do so, he scanned every face as he passed, and, dropping into a

seat in the smoker, lit a cigar, still using his eyes to the utmost.

The result was disappointing.

"I haven't been able to identify either one of them. They are probably sitting apart, and conducting themselves like strangers as they are so far as I am concerned. There are a score of men who, for aught I can tell, are in the plot, but I can't point them out. The only thing to do is to await developments."

Sitting at ease in the smoker, he devoted himself to studying his fellow passengers. A count showed that there were thirteen in the car besides himself, three of whom were negroes. These he dismissed from consideration. Two others were clearly out of the question, so that eight were left among whom he deemed it possible that one or more of the desperadoes were to be found, but, speculate as much as he chose (and he could not help doing so,) he was unable to decide upon whom to fix suspicion, not forgetting that the ones he had in mind were as likely to be in some other part of the train as in the smoker.

Studying his time-table, by the dim light overhead, the detective figured out the time of their arrival at Panther Hollow. He smiled grimly, as he muttered to himself:

"If no delay occurs it will be just about midnight, or as Worshipful Master Livingston would say 'Low Twelve.' It is a fitting hour for deeds that will not bear the light of day."

A glance at his watch showed that it was not yet nine o'clock. The train was far behind its scheduled time but was not likely to make up any of it before the morrow. It would do well indeed, if it held its own until then. For many miles, the track was winding and not in the best condition. Cattle were roaming abroad night and day, in that section, and occasionally caused the derailment of the trains, their stupidity in clinging to the track, having resulted in several serious accidents. True, they were likely to be asleep at night, but they always constituted a factor which the engineers feared.

Skidmore had journeyed the entire length of the Iron Mountain from St. Louis to Texarkana often enough to become familiar with the road; but, when the brakemen of the Pullmans are often unable to name the stations at which they halt, even in the daytime, it is altogether too much to expect a passenger to tell within a few miles of where he is at night.

The detective's way of deciding the question was by fixing the moment, when, according to his calculations, the train ought to make its halt at the station which he marked on his paper. That done, he set down the next stop at eleven, and, if that was carried out as he predicted, he knew, within five minutes of the time when they would strike Panther Hollow provided all went smoothly.

Almost any man can awake at whatever time he chooses, by resolving before closing his eyes to do so. Skidmore decided to visit the Land of Nod and to remain there until eleven. He did so.

All at once, while he lay doubled up in his seat, which he had all to himself, he opened his eyes in the full possession of his senses. Without stirring he drew out his watch and held it so that the light from the lamp overhead fell upon it: it was precisely eleven.

The train was standing still, and, peering through the window at his side, he saw the planking and small structure which showed they had halted at a station. The conductor, with his arm thrust through his lamp, was standing on the platform, talking with a man who probably was the agent in charge.

Rising from his seat, Skidmore slouched to the platform of the car, where a brakeman was in the act of pulling the bell cord, as a signal for the engineer to go ahead.

"What place is this?" asked the passenger.

The employee named the station that the inquirer had in mind.

"Where next do we stop?"

"At Panther Hollow, about twenty miles ahead; that isn't any station, and we halt there for water only."

"Thanks," murmured the officer, walking back to his seat, and lighting another cigar.

He was tempted to make another tour through the train, which had no sleeper attached (probably through some unexpected difficulty, since it is the rule to have one or two on all the through trains over this railway), but such a course on his part would be sure to subject him to suspicion, despite the disguise behind which he had fortified himself.

It would indicate that he was searching for some one, and that, under the circumstances, would, in the common parlance of the day, give him away. Accordingly, he resumed his seat

in the smoker and gazed absently through the window on his right.

Precious little was there to be seen. They seemed to be traversing the regions of eternal shade, where, for mile after a mile, not the first glimpse of a human habitation was obtained. At intervals, the fireman on the engine drew back the door of the furnace, and shoveled coal into the insatiate maw of the iron horse. At such times, a crimson glare was thrown out, on both sides of the tracks, and those who were looking through the windows saw the column-like pines, as they shot into view from the gloom in front, and were quickly swallowed up in the darkness behind.

But never once did the watcher discern so much as the cabin of a settler. There may have been more than one passed; but, if so, it was when no flare from the engine lit up the world of night, through which the train was plunging, on its winding way to its destination, far to the northward.

Gloom, solitude and silence were on every hand. Those vast tracts of pine woods contained bears, deer and smaller animals, and those that were near the tracks must have looked up in wonder at the fiery monster as it thundered through the dismal region.

"There could be no more fitting place for a crime," mused the detective, again stealthily consulting his watch; "the wonder to me is that the average man is as good as he is, and that he resists so many temptations to do evil."

By and by he peeped at his time-piece again. It was "Low Twelve," and the train had already begun slowing up for Panther Hollow.

CHAPTER IX.

LIVELY TIMES.

DETECTIVE SKIDMORE kept his wits about him, for, if ever they were likely to be needed, it was at that lonely spot, in the lowlands of Arkansas, where the northern bound train halted for the purpose of giving the iron horse a chance to quench his thirst.

Instead of waiting for the engine to come to a full stop, he slipped off the platform of the smoker, while the train was moving quite briskly. This was a wise course, for, if the criminals were waiting at the tank, he thus gained a chance of escaping attention. Their first act would be to order every passenger, not only in his car, but in all the others not to thrust his head out of the window or through a door; such is etiquette among those gentry. If the officer happened to be inside, when this order was promulgated, it will be seen that it would have embarrassed his actions.

True, by leaving the car and taking to the woods, as may be said, he placed himself in personal peril, but that was to be expected, and he had become accustomed to it.

The instant his feet touched the ground, he crouched down until the entire train had passed. It came to a halt so far off that the red light on the rear platform was a hundred feet distant. The moon was shining, but it was in such a quarter of the sky, that the shadow of the encircling woods wrapped everything in darkness.

The moment the wheels ceased to revolve, the detective, still bending over, skurried among the dense trees on his right, and, despite his care, came within a hair of losing his life.

Before he dreamed of such a thing, he was among a gang of train-robbers. He heard voices, caught the dim outlines of moving men, and distinguished the whinny of a horse, showing that the fleet-footed animals were within ready reach, and that the outlaws intended to take rapid flight as soon as their job was completed.

But for the flurry of the moment, caused by the knowledge that the crisis had come, he must have been discovered. As it was, some one addressed him an inquiry which Skidmore did not catch, but his failing to answer caused no surprise, because of the reason named.

Meanwhile, the engine had paused at the exact spot, the fireman clambered over the coal in the tender, swung around the dangling leathern snout by means of a rope, and, adjusting the nozzle in the opening at the rear of the tender, jerked an iron rod, and the swash and gurgle of water showed that the receptacle was rapidly filling itself.

The engineer had let himself down from the cab, and, with his long-necked can in one hand and a small smoking lamp in the other, set out to oil the joints of his steed, feeling of it here and there, to learn whether it had become heated, when a gruff voice sounded from the darkness behind him:

"Get back into that cab as quick as you know

how, and don't you touch a lever till you're ordered to."

The command was accompanied by several execrations and threats. The engineer turned his head and saw three men standing within arm's length. Their faces were masked and each had a Winchester rifle, one of which was pointed at him, and almost touched his face.

He grasped the situation on the instant.

"All right, gentlemen," he said, without the least tremor in his voice; "I don't see any use of quarreling over the matter; if any of you want a seat in the cab, we'll make room for you, though I must tell you it's against the rules of the company."

"Company be hanged!" growled the speaker; "up there with you and no fooling."

The engineer climbed into his quarters, blowing out the small lamp in his hand, and setting that and the oil can where they belonged. He then took his seat in his usual place on the right, shifting the steam gauge so as to allow the boiler to relieve itself of the surplus in its treasury, after which he drew open the door of the furnace.

"It's best to do that, to prevent blowing us all up," he explained to the masked guard, who sat down on the fireman's box, with the muzzle of his rifle lowered, but with his hand resting on the butt of his revolver, in his hip-pocket.

The blowing off of the steam made such a racket that it was hard to converse, and, since there was no call to do so, and the ruffian on the other side of the cab showing no disposition to be social, the engineer lit his pipe and smoked in silence.

The fireman was frightened half to death, by the appearance of the masked men. Letting go the snout, through which the water from the tank was rushing in a torrent, he came tumbling over the coal, as pale as a ghost. It was fortunate that in doing this, he released the rod which held the valve open, else the cab of the engine would have been quickly flooded from the overflow.

He meditated a leap from the tender, and a wild plunge into the woods, but a sight to the spectral figures in the gloom held him motionless, trembling in every limb and so weak that he was forced to sit down on a big lump of coal, where he stayed while matters quickly became exceedingly lively around him.

The moment it was known through the train that a party had held it up, consternation reigned. Mingled with the scenes of terror, were many not lacking in ludicrous features. There being no regular sleeper, most of the passengers had cramped themselves into the best postures possible, in the effort to woo slumber, and because of the hour being so late, the majority were unconscious.

It was a startling awakening, when the door of the car was jerked open, and the figure of a man appeared, holding a loaded Winchester with the order for every one to keep his seat, under penalty of being shot off-hand. Accompanying this warning was the pledge that no one would be deprived of his property. This party were the friends of the poor man, and they intended to divide the funds in the Express car belonging to bloated bondholders among themselves; that was all and the passengers might as well go to sleep again.

"Go to sleep again!" As though such a feat was within the reach of man, woman or child, when such scenes were taking place further front, and the train was surrounded by masked desperadoes.

Many of the men made desperate efforts to hide their personal property where it might escape the eyes of the thieves, for they could not credit the declaration they had just heard.

Some shoved their watches and purses into their shoes, under the seats, or in bundles in the racks overhead. One terrified individual offered up a fervent petition, in a loud voice, for protection against the ungodly despoilers, and only ceased when peremptorily ordered to do so, by one of the guards, who naturally disliked to hear an appeal to the Power to which, sooner or latter, he must succumb.

An elderly lady began singing a hymn in a weak quavering voice. No threats could quiet her, and she was finally left alone to complete it, which fortunately she did before the crisis arrived. Had she not done so, she would have suffered at the hands of the miscreants, who were not in the mood to show mercy to any one.

The Express car being the objective point of the assailants, the two defenders, Budd Acres and Jephtha Martin, speedily found themselves involved in the most sulphurous experience of their lives on an American railway.

The moment Martin announced to his companion that the train was held up, the latter stepped hastily to his side and peered out in the gloom. A glance at the masked faces, as dimly shown by the glare from the open furnace-door of the engine, left no doubt of the truth of the words. Had any such doubt been lingering in the mind of Budd Acres, it was dispelled the next moment, when he observed the action of the fellows toward the engineer. This was followed by the sight of two others, scrambling over the coals of the tender, in their hurry to anticipate the action of another couple in entering the Express car. These gentry, however, made the mistake of supposing that when the two men inside saw how largely they were outnumbered, they would make haste to surrender, for why should they be such idiots as to imperil their lives to save the property of others?

"Jep, I guess we had better try the Winchesters first," remarked Budd, moving to one side and picking up his rifle.

"I agree with you," replied his companion, imitating his action; "and, while we are about it, that light is likely to do them more good than us."

With which he reached up and blew out the light fastened at the side of the car. This left the interior in black darkness, so that what shots were fired into it must of necessity be blind ones. Then the two placed themselves back to back, one facing the front and the other the rear door.

The glare from the furnace of the engine still illuminated the tender, and threw a reflection against the front door of the Express car. Budd Acres had no more than fairly taken his station, when a sombrero and the head and shoulders of a man were thrown in relief against the glass, a fierce kick followed and a voice called:

"Open the door quick or we'll—"

At that instant, there was a jingle of glass, a screech followed, and the desperado rolled off the platform of the car as dead as Julius Caesar.

"I don't think it's a good plan, Jep, to hold any other kind of argument with those fellows," remarked Budd Acres to his companion.

CHAPTER X.

LIKE WAR TIMES.

SINGULARLY enough, the incident just depicted was duplicated at the other end of the Express car, within the next minute.

Martin did not so much as turn his head, on hearing the report of his comrade's Winchester, the crash of glass and the cry of the miscreant, as he toppled off the platform to the ground. He knew what it meant, and was expecting something of the same nature himself.

There was less light to favor him, the only illumination coming through the front door of the succeeding car; but that was sufficient to reveal the head and shoulders of a man, who struck the glass with his fist, and had just opened his mouth to command the defenders to let him in, when his skull was bored clean through by a bullet, that shattered the glass in the door behind him, and narrowly missed hitting a passenger in one of the seats.

"That's right!" commented Acres; "if we can't keep them out, we can make it lively for awhile. This begins to look like war times, eh, Jep?"

"A little," replied his friend.

The decisive check at both entrances to the Express car dampened the ardor of the assailants for a few minutes. They realized that they were confronted by two cool, brave men, and that whatever was won must be done by hard fighting.

There was a ducking of heads and hasty scrambling down from the platforms, while the desperadoes gathered at the side of the track for consultation. The limp forms were drawn from beneath the wheels, and left stretched on the ground beside the rails.

The council of war was hot. The miscreants knew there were fifty thousand dollars within their reach, and they meant to have it, but they were impatient. True, there was no telegraph of which any of the employees could avail themselves, and, had there been, they were all too thoroughly cowed, from the conductor to the brakemen, to make use of it. No train was due either way for hours, but there had been so many robberies elsewhere like this of late, that the authorities were sure to take the most vigorous means to run them down, and although every mother's son in the attacking party had a blooded horse within a hundred yards of the spot, and although he was familiar with all the

roads, paths and fastnesses of the surrounding country, he was anxious to get the job over as quickly as possible.

No bullet could bore its way through any portion of the Express car, except the windows, and wherever a head showed itself to the defenders, they made it a target for their unerring Winchesters. The only course, as it seemed, was to batter down the door and overwhelm them, for it was quite clear that with the entrance open, the defenders could elude any and every shot fired from the outside, while able to make their return fire of the deadliest nature.

"Get a hammer from the tender," commanded the leader, referring to the heavy long-handled implement, with which the fireman breaks the huge lumps of coal; "that'll fetch 'em!"

Nothing was clearer than that a few vigorous blows from such an object would break the door inward, as if it were so much card-paper.

"Look out!" suddenly called one of the group, standing on the ground, at one side of the tender.

All his companions, excepting the leader himself, instantly ducked their heads, and dodged aside with ape-like agility. The leader stood his ground, and stared around, not knowing to what his startled companion referred.

Glancing hither and thither, he fixed his gaze on the front door of the Express car. In the dim reflection, he saw indistinctly something, resembling a small stick of wood, thrust through the broken glass. Before he could decide what it was, a tongue of flame spouted from the end, a sharp report rung out, and, as for the wondering leader, "the subsequent proceedings interested him no more." That which looked like unto a stick of wood, was the barrel of Budd Acres's Winchester, who quietly remarked, as he drew back the weapon and sprung aside, to avoid any return shots:

"Jeptha, I surmise I plugged him; dost thy opinion differ from mine?"

"Don't stop to talk, Budd," replied his friend reprovingly.

"If the court knows herself, and she thinks she do, I am not stopping, my dear boy; but if my conversation is not agreeable to thy ears, I will suspend it until the spirit moves me again."

It looked for a moment, as if the fall of the leader would precipitate a panic among the assailants. No one had dreamed of such a reception as this. It was different from the manner in which they were usually treated, and like a general who finds his plan of battle disarranged, it was necessary to form new combinations, before pushing matters to a conclusion.

The two men that had climbed upon the tender, hung fast to the big hammer, but quickly leaped to the ground, stooping and stealing along, so as to interpose the main body of the tender between themselves and that appalling marksman, that never pulled trigger without hitting something. They gathered with several others at the side of the Express car, where they were out of range, and considered the important question as to what next should be done.

Meanwhile, the guard on the engine quickly found his situation anything but comfortable. He stood aghast at the way things were going. Then he uttered several execrations, and, standing in the cab, stared at the front door of the Express car, wondering what was coming next. The engineer grimly smoked his pipe, and managed to restrain his yearning to fling his cap in air and hurrah for Budd Acres and Jep Martin.

As if from the hollow of some underground cavern, a voice sounded from the Express car:

"Jack, sit back a little further on your seat, so I can plug that gentleman standing near you!"

The terrified gentleman referred to flung himself like a flash behind the engineer, dropping his gun and gripping him like a drowning man.

"Don't you stir!" he commanded hoarsely.

"I won't if you'll let me alone," replied the engineer, who, had there been the least hope, would have made as gallant a fight as his friends just beyond the tender.

Budd Acres's laugh sounded loud and clear, for the engine had stopped "blowing off," and a peculiar hush had fallen over the remarkable scene.

"Can't you sling him off of you, Jack, so as to give me a chance? It's getting dull in here."

And then the fellow was heard to sneeze from the smoke, caused by the several discharges of their weapons.

Jack saw that he was in greater danger than the desperado, who was panic-stricken.

"He won't shoot," said the engineer, "so long as you keep out of his range, but don't give him a chance."

Now, it is no reflection on the bravery of the

assailants to say that they hesitated to press their attack on the Express car; for the defenders possessed an immeasurable advantage over them. They were armed to the highest point, with repeating Winchesters and revolvers; they were cool, skillful and commanded the situation. They were never in plain view, so that every shot fired at them (and there were plenty), was fired by guess, and it was impossible to reach or overcome them without the certainty that still others must first fall.

Suppose the doors were smashed in simultaneously, and a rush was made by the entire party. The defenders were still in the impenetrable darkness, their presence being revealed only by the fitful flashes of their weapons, and, like the Comanches of the plains, they were wise enough to dart aside the instant after each discharge. With their repeating Winchesters, the two men would open fire upon the incoming swarm like a couple of mitrailleuses, and, to use an expression which does not do justice to the situation, matters would become lively.

Standing, therefore, beside the track and in such position that neither of the defenders could harm them, the council of war became hotter than ever.

"What can we do?" asked one in a furious undertone.

"Run the car off the track and keep it in the woods till we starve them out," was the wild reply of another.

"Yes," was the sarcastic comment of the fellow that had given the warning which saved all but their leader; "that would take about a week, and I don't suppose anybody would interfere with us during that time."

"How long before another train is due?"

"Not before daylight."

"Between now and then we can do a great deal. I have it! we'll build a fire under their car."

The strange proposition took on the instant. "That's it! that's it! we'll burn 'em out; then riddle 'em!"

"Be quick about it," added the fellow who seemed to have stepped into the shoes of the leader; "we've lost too much time already."

Hither and thither, the dark figures began running, taking good care to keep out of range of the front and rear doors of the Express car. There was a small supply of wood on the engine, used for kindling purposes, while the forest at the sides of the tracks yielded any quantity of resinous pine that was the very thing for their purpose. With a half dozen skurrying to and fro, the supply of kindling wood grew rapidly until it looked as if half a cord was collected underneath the Express car.

All this required but the contact of a single ignited match, to communicate with the heavy structure which would soon become a blazing furnace. The successor of the fallen leader now crept under the car, for the purpose of applying the lucifer which he held in his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

A FAILURE.

THE pile of wood and resinous pine under the Express car almost touched the floor. A lighted match would set this crackling and roaring, and, in the open air, it was sure quickly to communicate with the structure and reduce it to ashes.

The assailants drew back, not forgetting to avoid all danger from the end doors of the car, and watching their new leader, as he carefully crept between the trucks and prepared to touch off the funeral pile.

Meanwhile, Budd Acres and Jep Martin within the car, were not long in comprehending what was going on.

"It will soon be warm here," remarked the former, "and we'll have to make a fight of it on the open ground."

"I don't propose to stay and be roasted to death," said Jep, "when we can do something."

"How?"

"We can pick off that fellow on the engine, and when he drops, Jack can start ahead with the train."

"But it will take him so long to get under way, that they will clamber up again and shoot him."

"And we can stand here and let fly at them as they come in range."

"Suppose they finish Jack?"

"There's Tom left," referring to the fireman.

"He's half dead now from fright; you can't depend on him."

"Well, Jack will pull the throttle open any way, and after we are fairly started, one of us can climb over the tender and take charge."

"It's a desperate hope, Jep; I don't think

there's one chance in a hundred of its succeeding."

"It's better than staying in here and burning to death."

"You're right, and we'll try it."

But the well-nigh hopeless recourse was saved them.

The man under the Express car had reached his position and spent a minute or two in adjusting the fuel to suit him, before striking the match. It did not take him long to do this, when he extended one arm and drew the phosphorus along the rough edge of the rail. It instantly broke into flame, but a puff of wind blew it out before he could apply it to the pitch-pine.

Every one of the assailants, however, carried matches, and there were plenty at command. He struck a second one, and shaded it with his curving hands, until the twist of flame should become strong enough to withstand the light breeze that was blowing.

Holding the fire comparatively close to his face, the reflector showed his mask, the lower part of his shaggy beard, and a part of the rim of his sombrero.

He was in the act of reaching the little blaze downward, still protecting it with his hands, when he toppled forward from the same cause that had slain the leader. His lifeless body, falling on the match, instantly extinguished it.

The amazing thing about the occurrence was that the shot was fired by another person than either of those that had done all the shooting in the way of defense, up to this time. It came from the darkness of the wood on the right, the bullet almost grazing the heads of two of the ruffians who were breathlessly watching the starting of the conflagration.

Who fired it?

Before any one of the astounded desperadoes could think of an answer to the question, a voice shouted from the wood:

"Run, boys, quick, or every one of your horses will be stolen!"

The wildest panic instantly followed. No herd of cattle among which a pack of ravening wolves have dashed, was ever more hopelessly stampeded than were the train-robbers. They broke for the woods, as if a sheriff with a *posse* of a hundred men were at their heels, and tumbled and scrambled and fought in their fierce efforts to reach the spot where they had left their animals.

It was not so much the danger of losing the principal means of escape, as it was that of losing their blooded steeds. The only capital crime, in many sections of the Southwest, is horse-stealing. Many a man values his horse more than human life; and, had that party been given the choice between capturing the treasure in the safe of the Express car and parting with their steeds, they would not have paused a moment, in their unreasoning mood, to secure the money.

Hardly had the furious rush been precipitated, when from the darkness of the pine forest a man rushed forth, and made as if to leap upon the engine; but checking himself, he called up to the wondering engineer.

"Don't lose a minute! You've got the chance now to get away, for they'll be back, when they learn the trick played on them."

The engineer caught on at once. The man was a stranger to him but his words were unmistakably wise. The reversing rod was slipped far over, and the throttle lever sharply twitched. The engine responded with a heavy puff, and the jar of the sudden start went through the entire train, as it began moving slowly forward. The white sand was pouring down on the rails, in front of the drivers, in two streams and the ponderous wheels did not slip.

Faster and faster came the labored puffs, and the speed rapidly rose, the veteran controlling the throttle with consummate skill and coolness. The fireman, rallying from his panic, hastily shoveled in the coal and banged the furnace door shut, taking care, while doing so, to bend so low, that the tender intervened between him and any rifle-shot that might be sent after the engine.

Suddenly, above the rumble of the train, sounded the reports of guns, and the glass at the side of the engineer was shattered. Several dark forms bounded from the wood, and the flashes of their guns showed that all danger was not yet past. Had their position been at the engine, assuredly they would have tumbled Jack from his seat, but they were at the rear and though the track was curving, most of the bullets buried themselves in the woodwork or glanced off the iron of the engine.

The latter was bending fiercely to its work,

but its speed as yet was no faster than a moderate trot. A number of the desperadoes that had dashed out of the forest, started on a run after the cars and gained fast.

It takes a train a considerable time to acquire headway, even when drawn by the most powerful of locomotives and ere this one rose to half its regular speed the pursuers could reach the rear platform.

But Budd Acres and Jephtha Martin had emerged from the Express car and standing on the platform, were leaning dangerously far out, Winchester at their shoulders, and peering backward into the night. The men were dimly discernible in the faint moonlight, as they ran along the side of the track, converging between the rails.

The next instant, their rifles flashed again and again. They were pointed toward the outlaws, who quickly learned the fact; and, though none of their number was struck, for it was impossible, under the circumstances, to secure any kind of aim, they saw what would be the result, if they boarded the train: a fierce fight with the same men that had already made frightful havoc in their ranks. The assailants had vainly tried to force the defenders to come from the Express car, and now they had done so of their own accord.

The pursuers paused when they discovered that they were again the targets of those terrible rifles.

That halt, brief as it was, settled the business, for Jack Carter was improving every second of the time. The speed of the train became such that, had the men resumed their pursuit, it was too late: they would have been hopelessly left behind.

"I guess there's nothing more for us to do," remarked Budd Acres, turning about and re-entering the car, whither he was followed by his companion.

The interior was in darkness, but did not long remain so. Martin struck a match, removed the chimney of the lamp at the side, carefully lit it and replaced the chimney.

The interior was now fully illuminated, and, after setting their Winchester in the corner, the two took a survey of things.

The glass in the doors had been shattered to fragments, which lay on the floor and on the platforms outside. Here and there, little holes in the sides and roof showed where the bullets had buried themselves, instead of reaching the targets for which they were meant. Two had struck the pine box, inclosing the coffin containing the dummy, and appearances indicated that several had passed much nigher the defenders than they suspected at the time.

But no real harm was done. Budd and Jeph had not received a scratch, and it has already been shown what they performed among the assailants. The train, for a wonder, had run the gantlet safely, and, as it wound its way northward, it left those bodies stretched on the cold earth, with their stark faces staring upward at the stars.

It is rare that such an outcome follows the holding up of a railway train, but so it was in this instance.

"Jep," said Budd Acres, looking grimly around the small compartment, "do you know what I suspect?"

"No."

"That this hold-up was a failure."

CHAPTER XII.

PUSHING NORTHWARD.

WHEN Detective Skidmore dodged into the woods, after dropping from the train, and almost running against several of the robbers, he was in quest of knowledge rather than adventure, but, as often happens in the affairs of this life, the result was anything but what he anticipated.

Before one could fairly collect his faculties, the battle was on and matters were as lively as they could well be. The assailants gave their exclusive attention to the work before them, and naturally held no thought or suspicion of any attack from the rear.

The officer would have been only too glad to lend a hand to the defenders, but he was discreet. A shot from his revolver would draw instant attention to himself and was not likely to do his friends any good. He must wait.

He was thrilled by the defense of the Express car. He had never seen anything finer, and, as shot after shot came from the front and rear, and the criminals were beaten back and baffled at every point, he longed to fling his hat in air and cheer the men, but he did not.

At the moment, however, when he was confident of the triumph of Budd and Jep, the pre-

parations were made for setting fire to the car and burning them out. This was something he had not thought of, and its serious nature impressed him at once.

He saw that the men were so caged that they could not help themselves, and the passengers and employees were so panic-stricken, that not one of them could be induced to raise a hand in aid of the imperiled heroes.

"I guess I'll have to do something," was his conclusion; "I can't stand idly by while that goes on."

Advancing to the edge of the wood, where he stood close to the track, he waited, revolver in hand. He saw the leader, as he crawled between the trucks of the Express car, and was in the act of leveling his weapon, when the first match was extinguished. The second speedily flashed out and gave him the chance he wanted. He sighted as carefully as he could in the gloom and the rest has been told.

To insure success, the daring scheme must be instantly followed up. He did so by calling out that the horses of the ruffians were in danger, and then appealed to the engineer to pull out as quickly as he could.

Before the passengers could comprehend what was going on, Skidmore had climbed up the steps of the smoker, but he kept his place on the platform, until the flurry was over.

While standing here, he whipped off his false beard and shoved it into his pocket. Then, seeing that all danger was over, he walked through the smoker to the Express car, where the conductor and most of the employees had gathered to discuss the startling occurrences.

When the detective knocked, the faces of those inside were turned inquiringly toward him, as he stood plainly revealed, through the opening left by the destroyed glass.

"Who are you?" asked Budd Acres, advancing and pausing with his hand on the knob.

The man that shot that fellow under the Express car and called the engineer to go ahead before they returned.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Budd, drawing the door wide open and grasping his hand; "come right in and stay a week."

The detective accepted the invitation, and, as he shook hands with each in turn, gave his right name, for there was no call for him to mislead them as to his identity.

He did not say much, however, about himself, further than to make known by what means he came to be in the rear of the attacking party and how he stampeded them. He was warmly thanked by all, but he insisted that what he did was nothing, compared to the defense of the expressmen, who had beaten off a party, numbering at least a dozen, and all of the most desperate character. The truth was, Skidmore was so stirred with admiration for the fellows that he meant to know more of them. He, therefore, waited until the rest had left, when he sat down on one of the trunks, passed a cigar to each, and made himself at home.

There is a congeniality between brave, honest men like these three, and they are quick to read each other's character and fully to respond in the way of mutual trust. As they talked and even indulged in jest, the detective put the question that had been in his mind from the first:

"Have you any treasure in the car that could have tempted those fellows to make this attack?"

"In there," replied Budd Acres, "is fifty thousand dollars, which of course they knew all about. They have friends everywhere, it seems to me, who let them know when we have anything like that in our charge."

"You are aware of nothing more?"

"They might have found something in those trunks, but I don't think it would have amounted to much. I wonder that they didn't go through the passengers."

"You gave them little chance," remarked the detective, with a smile, addressing his words to both.

"They had guards at the doors of the cars," said Martin, and they could have done it without trouble."

"But the plunder in the safe was ten times more than they could have gained by despoiling the passengers. They have been taught a lesson, however, which they will remember for a long time."

"And so have we," laughed Budd; "when we get into St. Louis I'm going to ask the company to make our car fire-proof; then we shall have things as we want them. We would have been in a bad fix but for that shot of yours, Skidmore."

"Well, I did happen to work it in at the right

time. The match in the fellow's hand gave me the chance I wanted, though a couple of the others stood so near that I think I nipped one of their ears."

"I can't understand," continued Budd, "how it is that the boys when caught like we were, throw up their hands at the first call. They ought to be on the lookout and never taken off their guard."

"I don't wonder that the unexpected appearance of a lot of men in masks with Winchesters and pistols, eager for a chance to shoot, frighten people out of their wits. You have heard of that case down in New Mexico, where six train robbers compelled nine United soldiers to give up their arms."

"Yes," replied Budd, with a sniff of disgust; "there's only one thing that was lacking."

"What was that?"

"They ought to have set those soldiers up against the trees and riddled every one of them for their cowardice. I don't understand why they didn't."

Conversation continued without anything being said of special moment for fully an hour, at the end of which time the train came to a halt at one of the more important stations. There, the conductor, brakemen, employees and a number of passengers gathered near the engine and Express car and talked over the incidents and compared notes. The conductor sent a long dispatch to the officers of the company, detailing what had taken place, and did the same to the sheriff of the county that was the scene of the outrage.

In each of these accounts, full justice was done to the bravery of Acres and Martin, to which was undoubtedly due the saving of the large treasure in the safe.

Detective Skidmore gave no hint of his intention, but it is appropriate to anticipate events so far as one result is concerned. He impressed upon the officials the exceptionally praiseworthy conduct of the couple, with the result that they were not only handsomely complimented, but each received a reward of one thousand dollars for his behavior. Thus it came about that the mortgage on that little cottage and happy home of Budd Acres, was paid off within the following three weeks, instead of waiting the three years that he had counted upon.

The hour had grown so late, that, after the train had started again, the detective returned to his seat in the smoker, where, adjusting his muscular figure as best he could, he soon sunk into slumber, which was not disturbed, until the sun was shining and they had halted at a station for breakfast.

There remained many features about the business which puzzled him exceedingly. He could not make himself believe that the party that had held up the train knew of the diamonds within the pine box; they evidently learned of the money which was their sole object in bringing the train to a halt in the lonely section.

True, the precious stones possessed double the value of the bank-bills, but in what way could they have learned of their presence within a few feet of the safe?

There was every reason to believe that their shipment was known to no one besides Banker Livingston, Detective Skidmore and Undertaker Jones. Had others found it out, and, had a confederate taken passage on the same train, he had plenty of chances to telegraph ahead to some point, where the fact could be revealed. But all this implied a labyrinth of connection between the men from Africa and the ruffians of Arkansas that was past belief.

Be that as it may, the officer felt that he stood only on the threshold of a great mystery, whose solution threatened to baffle his every effort and best skill.

CHAPTER XIII.

IS IT A RESEMBLANCE ONLY?

ON reaching St. Louis, Detective Skidmore learned that the pine box and its contents would not start for Chicago for about an hour. He used the time to drive to the Lindell Hotel, where he thought a dispatch from Mr. Livingston might be awaiting him.

He knew that by this time the banker had learned of the holding up of the railway train, and of course he was anxious, inasmuch as the officer was the only one that could give him the information he wanted.

Sure enough, a telegram was handed him on entering the office of the famous hostelry, and it was from the gentleman whom he had in mind. It stated that he was much disturbed over what he had heard, and begged the detective to wire him the facts without delay.

"Strange that he says nothing about the death of his nephew," thought the recipient, as he took up the pen to indite a reply; "I suppose that nothing additional has been learned and probably will not be for some time yet."

Thus ran the telegram, which was handed to the banker shortly after, in his office in far away Bluffton:

"Everything all right; box was not disturbed; leave for Chicago shortly; telegraph me there what news you have about the death of your nephew."

This being sent, the officer re-entered the cab and reached the station with plenty of time to spare.

He was justified in felicitating himself over the success that had attended the venture thus far. Not only had the criminals of the Arkansas lowlands been beaten off, with severe loss, but it had fallen to his lot to give important aid in repelling the assailants.

"There is no reason to fear anything further," he mused, while waiting in the station with his senses alert; "some of those fellows are wonderfully clever, but the line must be drawn somewhere; a man can't learn and know everything; we took too many precautions in shipping the diamonds for any one to discover the scheme. And it was all useless, too," he added; "for I could just as well have carried them in my pocket as I proposed, and no hand would have been laid on me. But then I wouldn't have dropped from the train at Panther Hollow, and harm might have come to the two Expressmen, so it isn't well to quarrel with fate."

It occurred to him, while waiting, that if any one was on his trail, he would be there at that very time. A cautious scrutiny of the other passengers led him to fix upon three, who looked, as if they might be of that kind. He studied them for several minutes, with the result of acquitting two, but the third, he believed was the man, provided there was any such present who was holding him under surveillance, which he very much doubted.

This individual was of medium height, with full, sandy whiskers, was well dressed, with a silk hat, worn low on the forehead and appeared to be absorbed in reading a newspaper.

What first gave Skidmore a thrill of suspicion, was when he glanced quickly toward him, and perceived that the man was watching him, though he flashed his eyes upon the paper with such suddenness that one might doubt whether he was not mistaken.

The detective now fixed his gaze upon a window just opposite, on which the light struck at such an angle that he could see the face of the stranger. It was not a mirror, be it understood, but there was a peculiar reflection often seen, which served him quite well. Had he shifted his position a few inches in either direction, he would have lost the effect. At the same time, he knew the other could not use the same means.

With this advantage, Skidmore was not long in finding that when he was looking away from the man the latter was engaged in carefully studying him.

"That's odd," he reflected; "he feels something more than a passing interest in me."

But the most disturbing thought that came to the officer was that this was not the first time the two had met. There was something familiar in those half-concealed features. He had an excellent memory of faces, and was impatient with himself that he could not recall the time and place of their previous meeting. He racked his brain, but it was useless, and he finally took refuge in the natural belief that the resemblance was one of those accidental ones that we are liable to come upon at any time.

As quick as thought, he turned his head and looked at the man. He instantly dropped his eyes to the paper, held in both hands, and resting on his lap, but, abrupt as was the slight act, he must have known that it did not escape the individual who thus turned toward him.

Skidmore's impulse was to walk over to him, take a seat by his side, and, despite the discourtesy of the proceeding, subject him to a close scrutiny that would have settled the question.

But this would have been absurdly unprofessional and wholly unworthy of an amateur at the business. His true course was not to let the other see that he himself had become an object of interest to one of the men seated a short distance away. In fact, Skidmore had been extremely careful, despite the one or two glances that had been exchanged. What he learned was by the roundabout means described, and he subjected several other people to the same direct

scrutiny, with the purpose of deceiving any suspicion in the mind of the stranger.

Allowing his gaze to stray to the window again, he saw that, though the other held his paper closer to his face than before, he was peering over the top of it and at him. At this interesting point a lady stepped between the detective and the window that was serving him so well, and observation by that means was shut off for the time.

Before it was restored, Skidmore rose and sauntered to the outside, not looking directly toward the man, though he kept him in his field of vision. The detective was in a suspicious mood.

He recalled that the Hyler brothers had been followed for thousands of miles, across ocean and land, and both had fallen victims to the merciless greed of those who coveted the treasure in their possession. The fact that one of the crimes was done in the metropolis of the country, and the other in the town where he made his own home was startling and showed a defiance of public sentiment and law that stirred him with anger and made him long to take up the task of running down the assassins.

"I'll do it, too!" he added, with a flash of his eyes, "and they will receive no more mercy from me than they have shown to the innocent. Ere long, I shall deliver the casket into the hands of Miss Wetmore, and then be free to turn about and make all haste back to Bluffton, where I'll stir up things. Well, I'll be hanged!"

The stranger that had caught his eye a few minutes before, was lounging a short distance off, paper in hand, and apparently interested in a dispute between a cabman and a passenger, whom he had just brought to the station and who believed the charge was too high.

The man might have drifted out of doors, the same as the rest, with no object in mind other than that of whiling away time, until he could board the train. Skidmore did not catch his eye, but, for all that, he was certain that he had come forth to watch him.

Nothing in the manner of the detective revealed his feelings. He had a ticket entitling him to a seat in one of the palace cars, and he sat down like the professional traveler, who feels bored over the prospect of a considerable journey before him.

As he did so, he glanced out at the people moving about the station. The man he had in mind suddenly passed the window and gave the best view of his features that Skidmore had yet obtained. The latter broke into a quiet laugh.

"He bears a slight resemblance to Undertaker Jones; it was that which bothered me."

And yet, somehow or other, this conclusion failed to bring assuring peace to the mind of the detective.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SURPRISE.

No more unwelcome present can be sent to a family than a large outer case such as contained the casket of diamonds, which Detective Skidmore had set out to convey from Bluffton to the city of Chicago. Even though a telegram could have been readily sent ahead, giving necessary particulars, yet the unloading and carrying in of a coffin, at the residence of the widow Mrs. Wetmore, would have occasioned remark and looked altogether too gruesome. Her brother-in-law, therefore, avoided all this by having Jarvis Jones ship it to a well known firm of undertakers in the Lake City. No message was sent ahead, for the arrangement was that Skidmore should arrive at the establishment with the consignment and make known all that need be told.

The detective saw personally to the shipment of the box from the railway station, sat on the seat beside the driver all the way, and stood by while it was carried into the receiving room. There he met one of the firm and explained the case, saying that he and Mr. Livingston had taken this singular course, in order to secure the safe delivery of a valuable package that was within. The gentleman smiled and declined to receive the money offered, reminding him that they had been subjected to no expense, and the material which it was proposed to turn over to them was of itself full compensation. At the same time, he assured his caller that they had no objection to receiving similar consignments on the same terms.

Thus far all well. The detective stood by, while the two inclosures were unscrewed. The undertaker agreed to do his best to restore the bust to its original condition, and thought he could do so. When through, it would be reship-

ped to Mr. Livingston, at Bluffton, with a bill of exchange.

The detective confessed to some misgiving, while insinuating his hands among the fleecy garments underneath the shoulders of the marble; but all fears quickly vanished, when he touched the well-remembered casket, the key of which was in his vest pocket. Not wishing to open it in the presence of others, he remarked that everything was right, and carefully pushed it down within his inner pocket, over which he buttoned his coat. Then he bade the gentleman good-day and passed out on the street.

"At last," he murmured: "the diamonds have come through considerable danger, but, if those fellows had succeeded in forcing the Express car, the gems would have been as safe as they are this minute in my possession, for who except resurrectionists would disturb a dead body?"

The afternoon of a bright sunshiny day in autumn was well along, as he walked briskly toward the Palmer House, where he meant to stay while in Chicago. Instead of going direct to the residence of Mrs. Wetmore, he proceeded to the hotel, whither his trunk had been sent. He was travel-stained and naturally was desirous of making the best appearance possible, when he presented himself before such a charming young lady as the destined recipient of the present.

Truth to tell, she occupied so much of his thoughts that upon registering, he forgot all about the telegram, which he expected to receive from Mr. Livingston; and, going straight to his room, indulged in a bath, donned his very best suit, and, when satisfied that art could not improve his appearance, came down to the office in the elevator.

By this time it was dark and he took dinner. Then, when he came out in the office once more, he recalled the matter of the telegram.

Yes; there was one awaiting him and its perusal caused him no little astonishment.

"A strange discovery has come to light. Go at once to the undertaking firm of Williams & Brother Number —, — street and find whether they have recently had in their employ a man named Edward Vallelo. It is of the utmost importance; don't delay, and wire me their reply at once. Ascertain full particulars and telegraph at the earliest possible moment."

"A pity I didn't call here at first," muttered the detective, surveying the dispatch in his hands; "for it was to Williams & Brother that I delivered the coffin and its case. But this must be attended to. I wonder what the mischief it all means."

Pressing his breast to make sure the casket was there, he summoned a cab and was quickly whirling toward the undertaking establishment which he had visited, but a short time before, on that same afternoon.

Undertakers, like druggists and doctors, must be accessible at all hours, and, when the detective arrived at the establishment, he was fortunate enough to find the member whom he had seen before. He sat in his office, smoking a cigar while engaged in examining his books. He looked up and smilingly greeted his caller.

"Ah," he said, "have you brought another shipment? We are ready to receive it if you have. By the way, I think I shall make a good job of fixing up that bust. My friend Jones was prudent enough to put on colors that can be readily washed off."

"I am in quest of information," said Skidmore, gravely.

"I await your pleasure."

"Have you recently had in your employ a man named Edward Vallelo?"

The gentleman repeated the name several times and then shook his head.

"No, sir; we have not."

"You are sure of this, Mr. Williams? There must be no mistake about it."

"I am as certain as I am that you are sitting there. I have hired and discharged every assistant we have had for a dozen years, and, among them all, was none with the name you have mentioned. It sounds as if he was a Spaniard."

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing."

"What! have you never seen him?"

"Never, to my knowledge; you are the first one that ever pronounced his name in my presence."

Mr. Williams was too courteous to show any curiosity, though he must have felt considerable. The detective thought he was entitled to what he could give, which amounted to little.

"I have received a dispatch, urging me to ask

you these questions. Beyond that I know nothing, and only see that some deception has been used."

"That is quite evident: you are sure that our firm is the one referred to?"

The caller drew the telegram from his pocket.

"There is no mistake on that point. It gives the name of your firm, your business, and the number of the street; could anything be more explicit?"

"Not very well."

"Is there any other firm of undertakers of the same name as yours in the city?"

"There is none."

"Well, I am obliged for your courtesy," said the visitor, who then withdrew, and instructed the driver to get him back to the Palmer House as soon as he could. Arrived there, he wired Banker Livingston to the following effect:

"Williams & Brother have never heard of such a man as Edward Vallelo. Send me more particulars, for I am working in the dark."

Reflecting that it would probably be a full hour, before he could receive a reply to this message, Detective Skidmore determined to postpone his call upon Miss Wetmore no longer.

A few minutes later, therefore, his cab was rumbling swiftly along Wabash avenue, and set him down in front of the handsome residence of the widow and her daughter.

"I ought to have sent word beforehand," he thought, as he pulled the bell; "for more than likely she is out, or has company."

But when he inquired, the servant told him she was at home, and, after sending in his card, he received word that she would see him immediately.

Detective Skidmore and Miss Wetmore were not strangers to each other. It would have been singular that, when he was on such intimate terms with her uncle, where she was a frequent visitor, that they should never meet. When, therefore, the petite figure fairly danced into the room, with her fluffy golden hair, her cheeks tinted like a sea-shell, her lustrous blue eyes and in all the wealth of her marvelous beauty, she was aglow with pleasurable expectation, and hurrying right up to the caller warmly pressed his hand.

"I am as glad as I can be, Mr. Skidmore, to see you; any one from Bluffton is welcome and none more so than you."

"You quite overwhelm me," he replied, feeling the hot flush speeding to his temples; "I ought to have sent you word."

"Only to insure my being home; I did not see you the last time I was in Bluffton."

"No; because I way away. I am very sorry on my own account."

"And I am sorry on my account," she responded, with a ripple of musical laughter; "but how is my dear uncle?"

"As well as ever I saw him, when I left Bluffton, which was on Tuesday."

Thus the conversation rattled along for some time longer. The caller knew he was welcome in that house, and he thought with a thrill of pleasure, the surprise he had awaiting her, though of necessity it must be tinged with a certain sadness.

Miss Wetmore said that her mother was out for the evening, and informed the detective that he must stay until she came home, which he was very much inclined to do.

"I am sure," said he, after a time, "that you have not forgotten your cousins Dick and Jo Hyler."

"No, indeed," she replied, with a grave face; "poor fellows! they went off to Africa years ago; I received a number of letters from them, but haven't heard anything for a long time. But why do you ask?"

"I have sad news to tell you; they had hard times there, though, after awhile, good luck came to them, but both are dead."

"Oh," and the handkerchief went to the fair eyes, while her caller sympathetically held his peace until the first shock was over. He did not think it wise to acquaint her with the manner of their taking off; time enough for that when the edge of her grief was worn away.

"Tell me what you know about them," she said gently, when the flow of tears was stayed.

"There is not much to tell, except to deliver to you a present which reached your uncle a short time ago with the request that he would lose no time in placing it in your hands."

With this he produced the casket and placed it in her lap.

"What is this?" she asked, turning it over in her hand and curiously surveying it.

"Here is the key; open and find out for yourself."

She took the tiny implement, inserted it in the lock, gave it a turn and raised the lid.

"Why, Mr. Skidmore, there is nothing here that I see."

The detective leaned forward and peered into the interior of the small box. To his consternation, there was not a single diamond in it.

CHAPTER XV.

IS IT THE SAME ONE?

DETECTIVE SKIDMORE was so astounded that for a moment he sat speechless. Then he mutely extended his hand for the casket, which Miss Wetmore passed to him without a word, but with a wondering expression on her face, that showed she did not understand what it all meant.

He turned the little box over several times, opened and closed it, as though doubting his own eyes, and then, leaning back in his chair, exclaimed:

"Great heavens! that passes my comprehension!"

Recalling that no explanation had been given to the young lady, he rallied, and, looking in her face, said:

"Your amazement, Miss Wetmore, is not one-half of mine. When that box was last opened before this time, it contained ten diamonds, worth one hundred thousand dollars."

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know."

The two gazed into each other's faces in silence, and then he added:

"That was the present which your dead cousins brought from the other side of the globe, with the request that it should be placed in your hands without delay. I no more dreamed that I was not doing so than I do that I am in Bluffton at this moment. I took them from your uncle's safe on Tuesday last; I myself placed them in a box, and rode on the train with them to Chicago, and now where are they?" he asked in pitiful helplessness.

"They must have been stolen."

"Impossible!" and then reflecting on the absurdity of the word, he added: "I mean I cannot imagine how it was done."

"But you can find out."

"And so I will!" he exclaimed fiercely, springing to his feet. "I never knew anything like it, but it shall be brought to light and the diamonds shall be yours. I hope you will pardon me—"

"Pardon you for what?"

"The disappointment I have caused you."

"Did you arrange it?" she asked.

"No, but—"

"That will do; you have no apologies to offer me; I am sorry, because my cousins meant them for me, and you are more put out than I am: I beg you to be seated and wait till mother comes home."

"I would be glad to do so but for this. I am too upset to content myself for an hour in idleness; I must go back to Bluffton as soon as possible, and learn what all this means."

"But you cannot go to-night."

"No, but I may be able to do something in Chicago that will help in the matter. I am sure you will excuse me," and he walked toward the hall, taking the empty box with him.

Observing his agitation, Miss Wetmore did not try further to detain him. She urged him not to let the matter trouble him, for, so far as she was concerned, she would not give it a thought, but for the associations connected with the gems.

He made the best adieu he could, and, a minute later, was striding furiously along the avenue toward the hotel, his mind in such a whirl that, for a time, he was unable to think coherently.

Arrived there, he asked for a telegram. There was none and he chafed with impatience. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was less than an hour since he had sent his own message, but he was angry because they were not more prompt at the other end of the line.

While he was pacing restlessly back and forth, the dispatch came. It was not calculated to soothe his feelings:

"Come to Bluffton at once; can explain nothing till I see you; you are needed at this moment."

The detective took up a pen to notify the banker of the unaccountable loss of the diamonds, but flung it down again.

He doesn't tell me anything, and why should I trouble myself to give him the news? It will be time enough to let him know, when I reach Bluffton and find what he has to tell."

It was useless to attempt to sleep for hours.

He went to his room, and paced to and fro, his mind gradually growing calmer, until, at last, it began to assert itself with something of its native power.

He went back to the beginning.

"There was no mistake in the boxes, for I saw the diamonds after the empty one was locked in the safe; so it is established, beyond question, that they started from Bluffton for Chicago. I myself saw them placed in the clothing behind the bust, and stood by while Undertaker Jones screwed down the coffin lid and then screwed the lid of the pine box over that. We saw that box taken to the station in Bluffton, and I saw it after it was placed in the Express car. I rode part way in its company, and yet *somewhere* along the road the diamonds were stolen."

There were some facts about the strange business, which, it may be said, were self-evident, and the perplexed detective had touched upon most of them. To repeat, he was sure the diamonds had started from Bluffton for Chicago, but had never reached there, at least by the route in charge of Felix Skidmore.

One theory would obtrude itself. It was disagreeable beyond expression, but the officer resolutely faced it: it was that the gems had been removed from their place of concealment, while in the Express car, and in care of Budd Acres and Jep Martin. Unto no one else came the opportunity. Nothing could have been easier than such action on their part.

Rigid reflection, however, cleared the couple from suspicion. Although comparatively unacquainted with them, the detective would not admit that he had made such a woeful mistake in reading character. They could not have known of the casket in the box (without building up a theory too complicated and flimsy to stand), and, if there had been a dozen such caskets, they would have defended them with their lives, as they did the treasure in the safe.

"Budd Acres and Jep Martin are not the stuff from which thieves are made!" exclaimed the detective, who never spoke truer words; "and I hope they will never know I held any doubt of them for a single minute."

In his nervous state, Skidmore was annoyed by the vagueness of the telegrams that had reached him. They declared that momentous discoveries had been made, and he was urged to hasten his return to Bluffton, but of necessity he must wait until his arrival there before learning what all these intimations meant.

Flickering here and there, like fireflies in the darkness, appeared points of light, which gave out a glow that vanished before he could fix its nature. One incident caused great perplexity: that was the man who undeniably held him under surveillance, while waiting at the station in St. Louis for the train to Chicago.

The interest showed by that stranger in Skidmore was significant, for, among all the others present, there was not one that gave him more than a passing glance. The partial resemblance to Undertaker Jarvis Jones may have been one of those that all of us have seen in life, and he had dismissed it from further thought, until now when it forced itself upon him.

"It is impossible to suspect him, for he is one of the most staid and respectable citizens of Bluffton. Besides, had he been carried away by a momentary temptation, such as sometimes leads persons astray, he had abundance of time for reflection and could not have failed to see the utter folly of the thing. But, if he did decide to bring ruin and disgrace upon himself, he had not the chance; *that settles that.*"

And he firmly shut out that phase of the matter from further consideration.

Seating himself under the bright light, burning in his room, he took out the small box from his pocket, and subjected it to microscopic scrutiny.

"Is it the same one?" he asked himself, as he opened and closed it and turned it over again and again, and scrutinized every visible portion; "there were two of them, so alike that no one could tell them apart. Under any other circumstances, I would believe that, through some hocus-pocus, I had unconsciously exchanged them, but that was as impossible as it is that I myself stole them. I wonder," he added, with a grim smile, "whether Livingston will not suspect me. Clearly the chance was mine, but hold!"

It has been stated that the ten diamonds lay loosely in the crimson lining of the casket, being held immovable only when the lid was locked in place. Such being the fact, the stones could not fail to leave a number of faint dents or impressions, both in the lining of the lid and in the bottom of the box. Examination failed to show the slightest mark of the kind.

"By gracious!" exclaimed the detective; "this isn't the genuine box, after all! They were changed somewhere, after the right one was put in place."

This was an important discovery, if it should prove to be one. Until this moment all his reasoning and speculation had been based on the theory that the stones were simply extracted, and that this was the casket that originally held them; now he was convinced that such was not the fact.

Still, admitting that he was right, he saw himself no nearer the solution than at the first, for the difficulty of effecting the exchange was as great as that of abstracting the diamonds.

The whole thing was in a muddle, when, at last, he flung himself in bed and wooed sleep. Two nights later he was in Bluffton, sitting in the library of Banker Livingston, and in earnest conversation with that gentleman and a third individual.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT TEDDY DONOVAN SAW.

"I AM sorry to have caused you annoyance," remarked Banker Livingston to Detective Skidmore, "by my failure to be more explicit in my telegrams, but, truth to say, I was so upset by the discoveries that came to light, that I was afraid to do so."

"Why?" asked the officer, who had resumed his old place on the lounge, and was smoking one of his host's Perfectos, while the third party sat respectfully back in one corner, waiting until he should be asked to speak.

"There has been such cunning and subtlety used by those ruffians that I feared they would get hold of the telegrams."

"Nonsense! Such a thing is impossible, and you might have given me the points without interfering with matters, even if it became known to them; but that's neither here nor there. I obeyed your request, and came to Bluffton as quickly as the railway could bring me. Here I am, as much in the dark as ever."

The detective had gathered some information, but he had not yet told about the loss of the diamonds: that would come later on.

"Since your departure the authorities have been busy investigating the murder of my nephew Dick, whose body was buried day before yesterday."

"Have they learned who did it?"

"Yes and no, but Teddy there has some interesting information."

"Ah, Teddy," remarked the detective, looking smilingly toward him, "you are going to prove a useful man, are you?"

"I dunno about that, sorr," replied the fellow, hitching uneasily in his chair; "that's for you to say, sorr."

Teddy Donovan was the Irish coachman of Banker Livingston. He was a rather lively young man, given to drinking-bouts now and then, but honest and warmly devoted to his employer's interests.

"It may expedite matters," said the banker, "if I should sum up some facts that have come to light. Teddy kept in the background during the investigation, through fear of incurring my displeasure by the confession that he would have to make, if he revealed all he knew. But, when he realized the value of his knowledge, he came forward like a man."

"Or rather like *himself*, which is the same thing," remarked the detective, at which Teddy blushed and grinned.

"On that eventful night, when I gave him permission to visit his mother, at the other end of the town, he didn't go near her."

The officer raised his forefinger and shook his head at the Irishman, who grinned harder, turned redder than before, and fidgeted in his chair.

"However, I will do him the justice to say that no mother ever had a more dutiful son, and while he was bad enough to go out for a time with his friends, he left them comparatively early and started back for his snug quarters, in the carriage house. In doing so he passed near the hotel where my nephew met his death. I will let him tell the rest."

"Let's hear it, Teddy," said the detective kindly; "you know we are both your friends and you musn't hold back anything."

Thus encouraged, the fellow was explicit.

"I had had a few drinks, but I was that meself that I could walk as stiddy as at this blessed moment. It was so late that I met hardly a person on the street, and I was humming Little Annie Rooney sweetly to meself, when I arrived under the big chestnut which stands in the corner of the alley, at the back of the hotel. It was just then, when I had both hands in me

trowsers pockets, that I discovered that the right one had a thundering big hole in the bottom, and through that same hole slipped me pocket knife, two silver dollars, a jewsharp with which I'm accustomed to beguile the weary hours, a couple bunches of keys, a toothpick, a lead pencil, two or three love letters and breast-pin that I mint to have repaired."

"Are you sure you have remembered *all*?" gravely asked the detective.

"No, I'm not, but they'll come to me mind after awhile. Will, I stopped right under the shaddy of the tree, and was standing as stiff and straight as a wooden cigar sign, that overcoom was I wid the knowledge, when I heard a noise within the little yard at the back of the hotel. Looking up to observe what it mint, the head and shoulders of a man came up to view, on t'other side of the fence. He was climbing over and wasn't making any more noise than a leaf in falling from a tree."

"Will, sorr, I was that scared, knowing him to be a robber, that had been in the house, that I didn't stir and stopped breathing. I was standing so close to the trunk of the tree, that he passed within arm's length of me without observing the same. He must have worn rubber shoes, for he walked along without any more noise than a cat or a fairy."

"Then you were not able to gain sight of his face?" asked the intensely interested detective.

"Howld on a bit," replied Teddy, with a wave of his hand, enjoying the sensation he had caused on the part of his auditors, though the elder had heard it all before. "Ye moind the lamp that is burning at the corner, just below the alley. Will, when the spalpeen reached that point, what did he do but stop and look about him, as if expecting some one? The fule turned round so that the lamp light shone onto his face and it was as plain as is either of yours this minute."

"This is important," said Skidmore, sitting bolt upright, looking fixedly at the speaker, and forgetting the cigar in his hand; "you would know that face if you saw it again?"

"That I would, if it should be tin years from now and on the banks of the Killarney. I knew the spalpeen had been up to mischief, and I took a good squint at him, but I was thinking that he had been stealing something from the hotel, instid of driving a knife into the heart of an innocent slaaper, like Mister Hyler."

"Go on, Teddy."

"If he was waiting for some one, that same person did not show himself, and by and by the spalpeen went off with the same stillness as before."

"Do you know what time of the night it was, Teddy?"

"While he stood under the lamp and was looking back toward me, the town clock begun striking twelve."

Detective Skidmore glanced across at the banker and remarked in a low voice:

"I suspected it—Low Twelve."

"I resumed me promenade, after I was sure he was out of the way, and let meself in through the parlor door of the carriage-house. I ought to have been asleep at the time, and I would have been very soon, but for the loss of the articles because of the hole in me pocket. Ye will remember," Teddy hastened to explain, observing the smiles on the face of his listeners, "that all the time I was continually calling something to meind that I hadn't thought of when me thraa fingers first slid through the hole, and it was that which graved me heart. I was that throubled that, after blowing out the lamp, I lit me pipe and took me seat by the windy, and laining me elbow on the sill, looked out over the yard of the residence in sorrowful contemplation."

"I was puffing sadly at me dudeen, when he the power! I saw something moving amongst the trees. At first I thought it was a dog walking on his hind legs, but when he got where there was a little more light, I observed that it was a man."

"You did not see him clearly?"

"No; there wasn't light enough, but ye'll remember that a man on the grounds of Mr. Livingston is very different from walking long the street, even if he does wear rubbers. He hadn't any right there, and I always has a loaded gun and pistols riddy for such spalpeens, especially since the watch-dog was p'isoned. So I slips back and hunts the wippons."

"Being as I had no light in the barn, and I didn't want to scare off the spalpeen by striking one, it took me a little while to git me hands on the wippons. Bimeby, howsumiver, I had the gun and the pistol and I staals out of the dure."

I hild the gun riddy to blaze away the minute the chap showed himself, but he must have heard me, for, though I wint to the very spot where he was standing, he wasn't there.

"I called to him in a whisper loike, daring him to come out and let me shoot him, but he was too big a coward to do so or ilse he had gone. I sneaked round the yard, peeping here and there, but you gintlemen knows that there's a good many places among them traas where a dozen men might hide at night."

"Did you pass entirely around the house?" asked the detective.

"I did that twice without obsarving him. I saw the light in this room and knew that Mr. Livingston was sitting up, but I didn't know what company he had. At last I wint back to me reception room, and, being as the spalpeen was gone, I sthruke a match to light meself to bid. Gintlemen," added the narrator with a scared look on his broad countenance, "whin that light was burning I made a dridful discovery, ay, sorr, a dridful one."

"What was that?"

"Tha: I had had the narrowest escape of me whole life."

"How was that?"

"Nayther the gun nor the pistol was loaded! If I had run ag'inst that spalpeen in the grounds, he would have shot me for the big fule that I was in not looking to me wippons beforehand."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DAWN OF LIGHT.

"You were just as safe with your unloaded weapons," said the detective, "as you would have been, had they been charged to the muzzle."

Teddy Donovan looked wonderingly at the speaker. He failed to grasp such logic.

"Had the rogue been where you supposed he was, he could have shot you down as easily as rolling off a log. If you ever see any prowler in the grounds after this, challenge him from your place at the window and then fire."

This view had never struck the coachman. He was impressed by it.

"I'll remember the same, but with your permission, I'll fire at him first and challenge him afterwards, being as it would be more convanient for me."

"But hardly for him. As you prefer, however, but please describe the man that you saw under the gaslight."

"He was of the rig'lar height, wore a soft slouch hat, a snuff-colored overcoat, dark trowsers, had a smooth red face, wid a big Roman nose, and I think bright black eyes, though I couldn't make sart'in of the same. I obsarved enough of his hair to know that the same was as black as night."

Detective Skidmore started and looked at the banker. He had seen that man before. Both recognized him.

The coachman was subjected to further questioning, but these were all the facts elicited.

"Well, Teddy," remarked the officer; "we are much obliged for what you have told us, and we won't trouble you further just now; we may want you again. I presume Mr. Livingston will allow you to spend the rest of the evening with your mother, if you wish it."

The banker smilingly nodded his head, and Teddy, blushing like a peony, rose to his feet, bade the gentlemen good-night and left.

The time for serious consultation had come, and the detective and his host wished no one present besides themselves.

"He described him minutely," remarked Skidmore, looking across the room at his friend.

"Yes; it couldn't have been better; there is no mistake about it."

"I recognized the man at once; who would have thought it?"

"I never did, till I heard his story."

"Has Jones been arrested?"

"Jones!" exclaimed the astonished banker; "why should he be arrested?"

"Isn't the proof clear against him?"

"What are you driving at Skidmore? There is no ground for suspicion against Undertaker Jarvis Jones."

It was the detective's turn to be surprised.

"What description could have been closer? It was exact and you say you identified it immediately!"

"Have you lived so long in Bluffton, without making the acquaintance of Jarvis Jones, one of our most respectable citizens, against whom not the slightest charge has ever been made?"

"Did not your coachman describe the man who boxed up the bust of your niece and dispatched it to Chicago?"

The banker laughed more heartily than he had done in several days; he saw the blunder into which his friend had fallen.

"Yes, but that was not Mr. Jones. He is sixty years old, stoop-shouldered, white-haired, and with a fringe of scant whiskers under his chin; I'll have to introduce you."

"And who was that man that assisted me, or rather did the whole thing under my eyes?"

The person whom Teddy saw under the lamp-light; he gave the name of Edward Vallelo."

"How long had he been in the employ of Mr. Jones?"

"A single day only."

"How came Mr. Jones to employ him?"

"He was in need of an assistant, and the fellow applied at the right moment. He brought strong recommendations from the undertaking firm of Williams & Brother, Chicago, and Mr. Jones was glad to secure him. He seemed so handy that he was pleased with him from the first. While he was engaged in preparing the bust for shipment, Mr. Jones received an urgent call to go to the afflicted family of an acquaintance, a couple of miles out in the country, and he left Vallelo in charge. He supposed, of course, that you would understand how the matter stood."

Detective Skidmore gave a low whistle. Light was beginning to break upon him.

"Where is Vallelo now?"

"That's what we all want to know; he left on the train that carried away the box and the diamonds, and which you tell me you overtook and boarded at Wild Cat Creek. You probably had him as a fellow passenger for a part, if not all of the way."

"On what slight incidents great events turn! If I had but known that that was not Jones, all this might have been prevented."

"It never occurred to me, but I don't see that it makes much difference after all. The crime had been committed at the time you met him, and that is the only matter to be considered, since the diamonds went all right to my niece, who must have been pleased with the present, despite the sad association connected with it."

"But the diamonds did not go through all right; they were stolen."

"What?"

Thereupon, the detective gave a brief account of his call upon Miss Wetmore and what took place at her home. The banker listened in amazement, until he had finished.

"You must have exchanged the boxes yourself."

"Look into your safe and see whether I did."

Mr. Livingston sprung from his chair, and, stooping in front of the iron structure, quickly swung back the heavy door and brought the other casket to light. It was unlocked, so that the lid was lifted at once.

It was empty. His friend had made no mistake, at least none such as the banker supposed.

"When the box was opened in the store of Williams & Brother, I took out this casket," said Skidmore; "it not only contained no diamonds but never had contained any."

"How can you know that?"

"You remember how loosely they were placed, so that the lid pressed them tightly when shut. The pressure would have produced a number of impressions that would show in the lining; you observe nothing of the kind."

"You are right," remarked the banker, after several minutes' examination of the casket. "There must then have been three boxes, so alike in their structure, that no one could detect the difference; but tell me, did you not see the person who calls himself Vallelo on the train?"

"He must have been there, but he was so skillfully disguised and kept so well out of view that I was deceived. I saw him, however, at the station in St. Louis."

"Why didn't you arrest him?"

"On what grounds? I knew nothing of what you have just told me. Besides his identity was so well hidden by his fashionable suit of clothes and his false beard, that I did not suspect who he was."

"How can you be assured of it now?"

"He studied me closely and I was struck by his resemblance to some one, whom I could not recall until after I had entered the car. Then I remembered that he suggested Mr. Jarvis Jones, or rather the individual whom I supposed to be him. That he knew me was certain, for I was not wearing any disguise at the time."

"Inasmuch as he secured possession of the diamonds, how did he manage to enter the Express car and abstract them?"

"He never was in the Express car for a minute; he asked permission but was refused. Did

the real Mr. Jones direct him to accompany the dummy to Chicago?"

"No, but he thought nothing of it, when he learned that you had arranged to do so, but was prevented by being called away on the discovery of the murder at the hotel."

"When he did learn it, why did he not telegraph me?"

"Because there was no reason to do so. The train, even with its delay, was in St. Louis before Teddy told his story. Then, when it was clearly established that the bogus undertaker was the assassin, he was beyond reach, at any rate for the time. But, since he managed to secure the diamonds, despite our precautions, how did he do it?"

"By a sleight-of-hand worthy of Heller or Hermann."

"Explain."

"When everything was ready for the casket to be put in place, I passed it to him, and stood by and watched his movements. He slipped his hand back of the shoulders of the bust, fumbled for an instant, and yet, in that brief time, he exchanged the caskets. He slipped the genuine one up his sleeve and shoved the false one in its place, while I stood gaping at him like a country bumpkin."

"How came he to have the false one ready?"

"When he and his companion or companions found the empty one on Jo Hyler in New York, it revealed the trick by which they had been deceived. They had one precisely similar made and brought it with them to Bluffton, with no clear idea, of course, how they could make use of it. Vallelo was present when you explained your little scheme to Mr. Jones; he caught on at once, and, with a coolness and daring for which I cannot refuse my unbounded admiration, he executed his brilliant feat of juggling. Ah, he is a rare one, but I am not through with him yet."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACT AND FICTION.

"You have an ingenious way of explaining things," remarked Banker Livingston, "and while you have your hand in, I would like you to do a little more in that line."

"I don't pretend to infallibility in that respect; I have already shown you where I have blundered; when a man reaches the point of never making a mistake, he is ready to quit this footstool; but let me hear what is on your mind."

"You will recall the night that you came here in response to my urgent message."

Detective Skidmore inclined his head.

"At that meeting we perfected our plan for shipping the diamonds to Chicago, by means of a dummy dead body. You are satisfied that no living person overheard what passed between us?"

"I am."

"Very well; on that same morning, this man Edward Vallelo applied to Mr. Jones, the undertaker, and was taken into his employ. Now what induced him to do that? What was his motive in hiring to an undertaker, when he could not have known of our design?"

Detective Skidmore blew a puff of smoke toward the ceiling and watched it for a moment. Then he said, as if addressing the wreath of vapor:

"If I remember rightly, you had already formulated your scheme when I called; you sent for me to keep you company, and, in the course of the evening, made known your plan."

"That is quite true."

"Now, when did you fix upon this same plan?"

"My nephew called and left the diamonds with me. After he had gone, and I understood the situation, I fell to thinking over the matter and hit upon the method which we followed."

"When did you first speak of it to Undertaker Jones?"

"That same evening."

"Where?"

"On Main street, as we walked together, quite early in the evening."

"Recall what you said to him."

"I made no mention of the diamonds, but said that I was thinking of sending a valuable package to Chicago, in a coffin which, while appearing to contain a dead body, would not."

The detective brought his gaze down from the circling wreath of vapor overhead and with a light laugh, looked at his host.

"Exactly; this Vallelo or his companion overheard that conversation and it was all-sufficient. He knew of the plan and checkmated it, by entering the employ of Jones the next morning,

where he found the precise opportunity he was seeking."

"Can that be possible?" said the banker; "I never thought of any one listening to us, but why did not the scamp come to my house that evening when I was alone?"

"You did not tell Jones that the 'valuable package' was already in your possession. The miscreant, therefore, did not know whether you had it or whether your nephew retained it."

"He learned that the next day, when I explained fully my plan; but where then was the necessity for his slaying poor Dick Hyler?"

"The plea of necessity does not exist; it was one of those cold-blooded crimes that has not the slightest palliation. That which was done in New York had an apparent motive, but there was nothing of the kind here. The wretch who stabbed Dick Hyler to death, did it probably to show how little he cared for us and to emphasize his contempt of all officers of the law. At the same time there may have been a feeling of resentment because he had been compelled to follow his victim from the other side of the world to obtain the property he possessed."

"Again, was the holding up of the railway-train, as it seems to you, for the purpose of obtaining the money, the diamonds or both?"

"Until this evening, I suspected that the diamonds constituted the principal motive, but I cannot now think they had anything to do with it."

"Then there was no communication between these criminals and the outlaws who sought the money?"

"It has always struck me as incredible that there should be, but from what we now know, no reason appears for believing it. Recall that, if the train robbers had secured entrance into the Express safe, they would not have obtained the diamonds, for they were not there, though in one of the cars in the possession of another party. This one, having been sharp enough to steal them, what motive could he have, for asking others to run the risk they did in attacking a railway-train? Had there existed an understanding between the parties, he would have been likely to notify them that no reason existed for such an attack."

"Then why was the attack made?"

"For the fifty thousand dollars in the safe. It was simply a coincidence that the diamonds happened to be *en route* on the same train. Had those fellows, instead of wasting time in assailing the Express car, with the loss of life which accompanied it, simply held up the passengers and robbed them of all they possessed, they would have obtained two or three times as much booty as they hoped to gain. That is another instance of seemingly smart persons overreaching themselves. They threw away the golden apple lying at their feet, and sought the silver one beyond their reach."

"Do you think one or two persons were concerned in the death of Dick?"

"He said there were a couple, but we know of only one, that is with certainty, though it seems to me there must have been two, if not more. The job was too great for a single person. Yet it may be that the man who overheard your conversation with Undertaker Jones, whom we saw skulking in front of the house, whose face was revealed to Teddy, your coachman, when he was shrinking under the shade of the tree, and the prowler whom he afterward observed at the rear of your grounds, were one and the same person. We have not yet seen another of the party, though you think two were engaged in shadowing you the other night, but the possession of those diamonds would amply pay a half-dozen for circumnavigating the globe."

"And proportionately enrich a single individual; if that man or those men have succeeded in reaching Chicago or St. Louis, it is useless to search for the others in this town."

"So it would seem, for no motive could exist, so far as we can perceive, for their presence here, excepting perhaps one."

"What is that?"

"You will see, as I have already shown, that only a single person is open to suspicion, and the last known of him he was in St. Louis. Now, if he had secured one hundred thousand dollars in money, by his crime, the case would be simple, for he would have no difficulty in using it as he chose. It could not be traced, and all he would have to do would be to be ordinarily careful, and not 'give himself away,' as the expression goes. But it is different with such a collection of diamonds. There are ten of them, each of the first water, and of unusual size, for you know as well as I that ten-thousand-dollar diamonds are exceedingly rare. Those stones are as valueless to the owners as so many

pebbles from the brook, until they can be turned into cash, and it will be no easy task to do it."

"They may ship a part of them to Europe."

"Very likely they will try it, while one or two will be offered in St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia or New York, and perhaps larger cities. But they must of necessity move with extreme care, for this robbery will be known within fifteen hours to the authorities in all parts of the country; I will attend to that, and we have some mighty smart detectives in these United States, that are likely to teach these ruffians a thing or two."

"You have not named the reason for one of them staying in Bluffton, or visiting it afterward."

"The second or third party, knowing that no possible suspicion attaches to him, will feel safe in remaining here to watch our movements, and to keep his pal or pals posted."

"I can see no necessity for anything of that kind. Those who stay here cannot learn much, and, whatever it is, will not be of much importance to those further east. He will expect as a matter of course, that every possible effort will be made to recapture the diamonds and bring the thief and murderer to punishment, but why need he fear, when he is hundreds of miles away? If he cannot take care of himself and plunder, then he is not one of the men from Africa, whose cunning has aroused your admiration."

"I agree with your view, and think the chances are slight of any one or two of them ever visiting Bluffton again, unless brought hither on a requisition to answer for his or their crimes; but, in searching for a motive, that was all I could fix upon."

"Meanwhile, may I ask what you propose to do?"

"I shall communicate this evening with the authorities in St. Louis, and other cities, giving them all the necessary particulars of the crimes, and ask them to keep a particular lookout for Edward Vallelo."

"He will not travel under that name?"

"Of course not, nor is he likely to carry much resemblance to Undertaker Jones's assistant, but he may continue to look like the man I noticed at the railway station. Even if he disguises himself still further, there will remain tell-tale evidences that will awaken suspicion on the part of a shrewd detective, who does not need the spur of the big reward you have offered to do his best, for there is glory to be gained here, and of the kind which is the best capital in the world for a detective."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT THE DRUMMER SAW.

It was comparatively early in the evening that Detective Skidmore left the banker's house, and proceeded straight to the telegraph office, whence he sent a number of messages to the authorities of the principal cities. While thus engaged, and while passing along the street, he kept his eyes open, half hoping that he might catch sight of that mysterious party, who was concerned in the different crimes.

He observed absolutely nothing. He was the only patron in the telegraph office and he detected no signs of any person's surveillance of him, while going to and coming from the place.

"There's nothing to be gained here," was his conclusion; "they are hundreds of miles away at this moment. As likely as not, they have taken passage on one of the Atlantic steamers, and we shall never hear or see them again."

"Hello, Skid, when did you get back?"

It was a policeman who hailed him, Watkins by name. He was at the hotel immediately after the discovery of the murder of Dick Hyler, and had been active in the attempts to trace the criminals. He was a trustworthy man, but had never attained any marked success as a detective.

"I got back this evening," replied the professional; "is there anything new about this business?"

"Not much; we picked up a little news awhile ago that might have served us, had we got it sooner, but it's too late now."

"What's that?" asked the interested Skidmore, as he fell into step with his friend and they paced slowly along the street.

"A Chicago drummer called at Headquarters, and told the chief that he believed he saw the second man that had a hand in the death of the nephew of Mr. Livingston."

"Where is your informant?"

"I left him talking with the chief, but I guess he has gone back to the hotel by this time."

"Do you know his name?"

"Thoman, if I remember rightly."

Repressing the interest caused by the words of the policeman, Skidmore remarked that he would drop in at the hotel and have a talk with the gentleman, if he was there. He walked to the next corner with his friend, and, bidding him good-night, strolled to the inn that had been the scene of the stirring event several days before.

Examining the register, he saw the name, "Wash Thoman," hailing from Chicago. Upon inquiry of the landlord, he was told that the guest finished his supper a short time before, and probably was in his room, though he was uncertain.

Skidmore lost no time in going thither and knocking. A voice from within shouted, "Front!" and taking that as an invitation to enter, he did so, and immediately stood in the presence of the party whom he was seeking. A few words sufficed to explain matters, and accepting the proffered cigar, the detective took a seat.

Wash Thoman was a gentleman approaching middle life, with a smooth face, a bright eye, neat attire and an exceedingly wide-awake appearance. After stating that he was looking into the murder of a few days before, the detective said he had been told by one of the policemen that there was reason to believe that Mr. Thoman, had seen the confederate of the assassin observed by Mr. Livingston's coachman, and who appeared to have escaped the notice of all others.

The drummer, who stated that he represented a large clothing firm in Chicago, and had been traveling as far south as San Antonio, Texas, elevated his slippered feet on a chair in front, and, leaning back with his hands shoved into his trousers pockets, puffed away at his cigar, after the manner of one who takes things easy in this life.

"It's a queer experience I had," he said, "and I'm sorry that I didn't understand it sooner. I was in Bluffton that night—"

"But you did not stay here," interrupted the detective.

"No; I stopped at the lodging-house, near the railway station. I wanted to leave early on the train, and, as I like to sleep all I can in the morning, I could thus save a good deal of time, as you know we are a considerable way from the station while in this hotel. I left on the first train, and, therefore, knew nothing about the murder, until I reached Little Rock, where I stayed a couple of days. There I read the account in the papers, and, for the first time, was struck with the thought that possibly I had seen both the criminals. As soon as I could finish my business, I came back to Bluffton and went to the chief of police; that was this afternoon. There I heard for the first time the story of Mr. Livingston's coachman, which you know was not published in the papers. Then I knew I had seen the men."

The drummer paused long enough to puff his cigar into vigorous life, before resuming, while the detective, with his gaze fixed upon his face, listened in silence:

"I had been out on a quiet racket and was returning, when I heard the town clock striking midnight. I stopped under a lamp post to compare my watch. I discovered that I had forgotten to wind it and it had run down. I wound it, set the hands, slipped it into my pocket, and was about starting off again, when I saw on the other side of the street, a man advancing with no more noise than if he was a shadow. As there is a brick pavement there, it struck me as suspicious, and I stepped up close to the lamp-post, where the glare passed over my head, and the shadow hid me from the sight of any one, not on the same side of the street."

"As the man paused, he turned about and gave me a good view of his countenance. It answered perfectly to the description of the coachman, and, as it was near the hotel, he must have been the same person: there can be no doubt of that."

"May I ask whether you observed the coachman?"

"I did not. The actions of the stranger were so curious that I tried to follow him. He was going in the same direction with me—that is toward the railway station, but he scooted off so fast that he was gone before I knew it, disappearing around the next corner."

"And that was the last of him?"

"Not by a large majority; I had given him up, and sauntered along at my usual gait, for several blocks. When close to the lodging-house, I passed two men, standing near the

track and talking in low tones. I thought nothing of it, until I recalled that one of them was the fellow I had noticed, with the rubber shoes, and who acted as if he expected someone to join him. Since I had seen him, I gave the other a sharp glance as I passed."

"Did you have a good view?"

"It couldn't have been better if he had posed for it. He was tall, thin, with a sandy beard, Roman nose, a derby hat, dark clothing and carried a slender cane in his hand, with which he occasionally tapped the toe of his foot. I did not let him see that I felt any interest in him, though, from the actions of the other, I was a little curious. He watched me sharply as I walked by, and I acted as though I was busy thinking of something else. My interest, however, was not strong enough to lead me to put myself to any inconvenience, for it was late and I couldn't forget that I had to rise early the next morning. So I went to the lodging-house and got into bed with as little delay as possible."

"Your description of the second party is admirable and ought to cause his identification."

"I can give you a much better one. One of his front teeth was missing; he was partly bald; he wore dog-skin gloves and patent-leather shoes, and his beard is just beginning to turn gray."

"What opportunity had you for learning all this?" asked the astonished detective.

"It came to me the following day. The man sat in the smoker of the north-bound train, two seats ahead of me. I knew him the instant I laid eyes on him, and had plenty of opportunities to gather all this information."

"And you left the train at Little Rock. What a pity you did not continue with him to St. Louis or Chicago!"

"But he didn't go to either of those places, at any rate not on my train. He got off long before we arrived at Little Rock."

"Where?"

"That was the odd feature of it. I watched him closely enough to see that his ticket was for Marshton, several miles beyond Panther Hollow, but, when the train struck the latter place, it was running slowly, from some cause, and he glanced out of the window for a minute or two, as if trying to recognize the spot. Then all at once, he sprang up, hurried out on the platform and dropped to the ground. I was that much interested that I yanked up the window to see how he made out."

"He was evidently used to the business, for he ran but a few paces alongside the track, when he checked himself, and, as we began rounding the curve, disappeared in the woods."

"This is startling information," remarked Detective Skidmore; "I presume you have not seen the man since."

"No, but for what reason do you imagine he left the cars at that lonely place, where a train was held up late that same night?"

"It looks as if he had some understanding with the robbers that fared so badly," replied the detective, feeling that the labyrinth of speculation and uncertainty was opening out before him, and extending beyond the horizon of his knowledge. "I hope that what you have told me may be the means of bringing the miscreant to justice, and incidentally of securing to you the handsome reward that has been offered for the detection of the assassins."

CHAPTER XX.

"ALL RIGHT."

"If success results from the information you have given," said Detective Skidmore, "the reward shall be yours and it will be a handsome bonus."

"Quite fair," replied the drummer, leisurely puffing at his cigar, as though it was an ordinary business transaction; "in fact I would be willing to take a further hand in it, if you see anything I can do."

"If you can get a few days off from your business—"

"I can always manage that," interrupted the other, with a significant grin: "we drummers understand that sort of thing and are allowed considerable margin."

"I will see at any rate that your expenses are paid, whether our work amounts to anything or not."

"That's business: what do you propose?"

"That we shall take the train to-morrow morning and get off at Panther Hollow. I will arrange it with the conductor."

The drummer looked wonderingly at the detective.

"What do you expect to accomplish by that?"

"Probably nothing, but, inasmuch as one of

the men, and a leader at that, left the car at that point, we may be able to gather a few points that will give us a clue."

"It's a strange proposition, but since you advise it, I'm with you. I have often thought I was cut out for a detective and missed my calling when I became a drummer."

Detective Skidmore felt like remarking that the majority of mankind are of the same opinion and imagine that success in the detective line is one of the easiest things in the world. But he kept his views to himself.

"It will be necessary that I should telegraph to the house that I will not be back for several days, and they need send me no message until they hear from me again."

"I must send off some dispatches also," remarked the officer, feeling that no time was to be lost in notifying the authorities elsewhere of the additional information he had gained.

"All right; we'll go to the office together."

Mr. Thoman kicked off his slippers, put on his shoes, donned a light overcoat and his cap, and led the way down-stairs, Skidmore taking his place by his side, when they reached the bottom of the stairs, while they continued chatting and smoking, until they arrived at the telegraph office.

They stood close to each other while preparing their messages, and as the drummer evinced some curiosity as to what his companion was doing, Skidmore allowed him to see the one directed to the authorities at St. Louis. This was a request for them to use all possible effort to arrest a person, whose description was given and which was that of the man pictured by the drummer.

"That's good," he remarked admiringly: "you've hit it exactly."

"There's no telling whether he is in St. Louis or some other city," added Skidmore, "so it's necessary to put the officers on their guard in other places."

While this little interchange was going on, the detective caught a glimpse of the dispatch penned by his companion, but, not wishing that his curiosity should be seen, acted as though he knew nothing of what he had written.

"We will take the first train in the morning," he added, as they came out on the street once more, "if that is agreeable to you."

"It will suit as well as any other plan. I intended to put in a good long sleep, but I see the importance of improving our time and will retire early to my virtuous couch."

"I will go home and meet you at the station; good-night."

"Good-night; pleasant dreams," and they separated.

Meanwhile, the authorities of the county in which the attempted train robbery was made, had not been idle. The outrage was one of the most high-handed that had occurred in the history of the State and they moved vigorously and promptly.

The outlaws, after their failure, mounted their blooded horses and scattered among the solitudes, stretching away for miles in every direction from Panther Hollow. Like the Apaches, when hard pressed, they dissolved into couples and the latter separated when the pursuit became too hot, so that capture was well-nigh impossible.

But a certain measure of success was attained, for the sheriff was a daring and skillful officer who called the right kind of men around him and set about the business with a vim and resolution that was discouraged by no obstacle. They succeeded in running down three of the desperadoes, and in effectually breaking up the gang that had terrorized that section for years. These three were tried and sentenced to long terms in the Penitentiary.

The ruffians were less thoughtful of their fallen comrades than the American Indians, for they left them stretched on the ground near the track, with their white faces upturned to the One whom they had so grievously offended. These were taken in charge by the authorities, and, after excellent photographs were taken of their faces, were buried.

The two principal leaders were easily identified by name, for they had been so defiant that they frequently showed themselves in public places. The countenances of the others were familiar to many, who, although they knew a price was set upon their heads, dared not betray them into the hands of the law.

The pictures of the slain men were sent to different points, with a view of helping their identification. Detective Skidmore was not present at the inquest, the subpoena not arriving at Bluffton until too late. But knowing the part he had taken in the affair, copies of

the likenesses were sent to him, and, on his return from his interview with the drummer, he found them awaiting him at his lodgings.

He examined the batch with a curiosity that can well be understood, scrutinizing each vicious countenance with the closeness of one searching for an old acquaintance.

"I have seen him and him and him," he mused, as he took three of them in hand, and held them so that the light produced the strongest effect, "but the others are strangers. I wonder which one it was I dropped, when he was about to set fire to the Express car. I guess it was this fellow, though I can't be sure and it is as well that I cannot."

That for which he was hunting he did not find; there was no face among the group that answered the description given to him by Wash Thoman, the Chicago drummer.

The officer followed the example of his new acquaintance, and retired at what was a comparatively early hour for him. He was becoming accustomed, in a way, to the bewildering phases of the business that was constantly opening out before him, but a light had broken in upon him that evening which kept him awake for a long time. He had not given a hint of it to Thoman, and did not intend to do so for some time to come.

"The end is not far off," was his thought, when, at last, sleep closed his eyelids and he fell into a state of unconsciousness that was full of disturbing dreams.

The morning dawned cloudy and lowering, but no rain was falling, and the sky cleared up and allowed the sun to show itself soon after it climbed above the horizon.

He was at the station ten minutes before train time. Had the cars arrived when due, nothing could have saved the drummer from being late. He was descried hurrying along the main street, grip-sack in hand, like one who knows he has not a second to spare. He came up panting and laughing.

"That confounded watch will be the death of me yet," he said as he greeted his new acquaintance; "I let it run down again and hadn't time to do more than swallow a cup of coffee and a roll; I did my chewing on my way back here. But where's the train?" he abruptly asked; "it's time for it."

"The agent tells me it is a half-hour late."

"If I had only known that, how much I might have saved! I could have slept longer and had a square meal, but it is hardly worth while to go back now," he said, looking longingly down the street, as if half-disposed to make a break.

"No, but you have time to finish your breakfast in the restaurant across the railroad."

"By George! I'll do it!" he exclaimed, striding over the tracks, and disappearing through the door of the place, where a number of others were similarly improving the time.

When he emerged fifteen minutes later, an enormous cigar protruded from his mouth and he was the picture of satisfaction.

The two paced up and down the platform while waiting. The detective could not repress a little nervousness, and had visited the telegraph office in the station several times. Just before the train rolled in, the telegraph boy, whom he was watching through the window, signaled to him that his dispatch had arrived.

"Excuse me," he said to his companion, hastening away; "I'll be with you in a minute."

The message addressed to the detective was without signature and contained only the two words: "All right."

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

THE drummer took a step toward the platform of the smoking car, as the train came to a stop, and had placed one foot on the step, when detective Skidmore touched his shoulder.

"One moment, if you please—"

The next instant the two were struggling like a couple of catamounts. They locked arms, struck, pulled and pushed and fought fiercely, falling to the platform once, then up again, and at it again with indescribable fury. Neither spoke, for they had no breath to spare, but panted, glared and strove each with might or main to master the other.

The awed passengers gathered around, wondering what it all meant. A couple of brakemen were about to interfere, when Skidmore called out:

"Hands off! I'll manage him!"

As he spoke, a sharp click was heard, and the athletic but exhausted drummer ceased his struggles. The handcuffs were secured, and he was helpless. Even then he refused to speak,

except to utter a bitter execration, as he was led into the smoker and given a seat with the officer beside him. They formed an odd picture, these two men, who, a short time before, seemed to be on the most friendly terms—now scowling, angry, and silent, as they rode mile after mile over the lonely railway, with passengers continually entering and leaving the car for the purpose of getting a look at them.

All at once the captive seemed to thaw out and show a wish to become confidential.

"Well, Skid," said he, with a curious grin, "you played it on me fine, that time."

"It was hard work," replied the officer, very glad for a chance to exchange words with the fellow. "You gave me the hardest tussle I ever had."

"Confounded fool that I was," muttered Thoman, "but you've got me dead to rights—no denying that. Come to think, Skid, I made a mistake in the statement I gave you the other night."

"How?"

"You remember I saw the second party standing by the railroad at Bluffton shortly after Dick Hyler got his quietus."

"Yes."

"I gave you what you called a good description. It may have been good, but it was wrong."

"In what respect?"

"That second individual looked like another person altogether. In fact it was another person, for, it was myself!"

"I am not surprised," coolly replied the detective; "I suspected it at the time, and I think you'll admit that the little flurry at the railway station showed that I became sure of it."

"It does have that look," drily admitted the prisoner.

"And the man you telegraphed to at Marsh-ton is the one who slew Dick Hyler and stole the diamonds, by hiring out to Undertaker Jones, as an assistant, and who changed the caskets, while seeming to place the right one in the coffin."

"Whew!" exclaimed the manacled man, "you've played it cleaner than I thought; but," he glanced furtively around, "I'll admit that you're right."

It may sound strange to the reader that this cunning desperado after being entrapped in this fashion, should have talked so freely to the officer, and made such a confession as he did; but, it must be borne in mind that the confession was utterly valueless, since it was heard by no one else. The scoundrel made sure of that. Under the circumstances, no court would admit it, and besides the fellow had an object, which appeared later on.

"Of course you're the partner of the other fellow."

"Yes, and have been for years. We followed the Hylers from Cape Town; we separated at Liverpool and I attended to Jo. It was a slip, but the little box found on him in New York told the scheme they had worked on us. I had another made like it, shipped the right one by Express to Dick at Bluffton, and me and my pard followed."

"Your story is very straight," said the detective, "and I would be much obliged if you will repeat it in the courtroom, or sign a written statement."

The fellow turned and looked squarely in the face of the officer. Then he grinned and closed one eye.

"I rather think you would! It would be worth considerable to you. But, see here, Skid," he added, lowering his voice, "you would like to make say ten thousand wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would."

"We're approaching Marsh-ton; I'll make a rush; you'll follow; you'll tumble on the platform; I'll do the rest. Within a week you'll receive a little billet-doux—honor bright. See?"

It was Skidmore's turn to look into the face of his companion and make precisely the same grimace and wink that he had given. He added, with a low laugh:

"It won't work, my boy—but here we are."

The train began slowing up for Marsh-ton, and when it came to a halt a surprising thing took place. Don Barmore, one of the most noted detectives of St. Louis, walked into the smoker with a handcuffed prisoner. A lightning glance passed between him and Skidmore's man, and despite the unsurpassable coolness of the two, each uttered a low execration.

Barmore and Skidmore were comrades and had been working together in this business. They nodded pleasantly, and the former seated himself with his prisoner directly in front.

During the ride to Little Rock he told his story, which was short and to the point.

With a recklessness, born of his long immunity from detection, this fellow had openly shown himself in Marsh-ton immediately after the robbery. Barmore suspected him, but did not effect the arrest until after the exchange of telegrams with Skidmore.

The arrest of the pretended Valerio was important of itself, but the most astounding result was the discovery on his person of the casket with the ten missing diamonds!

At Little Rock the prisoners were lodged in jail, until the next day, when, still guarded by the two detectives, they were removed to Bluffton and committed for trial.

The authorities were in no mood to be hampered by technicalities and fine-spun theories, over these "operators." The jury decided, after a full and fair investigation, that both were guilty of capital offenses and they were hanged, as they richly deserved to be.

When the second criminal saw that all hope was gone, he made a confession, which accorded with that of his partner in crime. It was he who did poor Dick Hyler to death in the hotel at Bluffton, and it was the sham drummer that struck down the other brother in the city of New York.

It was late on the night of the capture that Detective Skidmore rung the bell of Banker Livingston's home. The gentleman was sitting in his library as usual, and soon learned the strange story his trusty friend had to tell. He listened with breathless interest, and when the casket was opened, and the blazing treasures were revealed, he could hardly believe his senses. But it was all real and not a dream.

"You need not be afraid to keep them in your safe to-night," added the officer, "and Miss Wetmore shall have her present after all—"

"Hark!" interrupted the banker, suddenly.

They listened. The town clock was striking the hour of midnight.

"It is Low Twelve," said the host; "odd isn't it?"

THE END.

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